

THE MINNESOTA REVIEW

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Roy Harvey Pearce

Whitman Justified: The Poet in 1860

Where are we going, Walt Whitman? The doors close in an hour.
Which way does your beard point tonight?

(Allen Ginsberg, "A Supermarket in California")

MY TITLE comes from the fourteenth of the "Chants Democratic" in the 1860 *Leaves of Grass*. (This is the poem which finally became "Poets to Come.") The first two stanzas read:

Poets to come!

Not to-day is to justify me, and Democracy, and what we are for,
But you, a new brood, native, athletic, continental, greater than before
known,

You must justify me.

Indeed, if it were not for you, what would I be?

What is the little I have done, except to arouse you?

Whitman is, he concludes, "the bard" of a "future" for which he writes only "one or two indicative words."

The vision is utopian, of course—and became increasingly so in

the 1870's and 80's, when he was calling for, even guaranteeing, a state of things whereby poems would work so as eventually to make for the withering away of poetry. In a preface of 1872 he could claim:

The people, especially the young men and women of America, must begin to learn that Religion, (like Poetry,) is something far, far different from what they supposed. It is, indeed, too important to the power and perpetuity of the New World to be consigned any longer to the churches, old or new, Catholic or Protestant — Saint this, or Saint that. . . . It must be consigned henceforth to Democracy *en masse*, and to Literature. It must enter into the Poems of the Nation.

It must make the Nation.

And by 1888 (in "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads") he could claim that, contrary to European critical opinion, verse was not a dying technique.

Only a firmer, vastly broader, new area begins to exist — nay, is already form'd — to which the poetic genius must emigrate. Whatever may have been the case in years gone by, the true use for the imaginative faculty of modern times is to give ultimate vivification to facts, to science, and to common lives, endowing them with glows and glories and final illustriousness which belong to every real thing, and to real things only. Without that ultimate vivification — which the poet or other artist alone can give — reality would seem to be incomplete, and science, democracy, and life itself, finally in vain.

These two statements (and they are quite typical) sum up Whitman's growing sense of the power of poetry, and thus of the poet: Religion, operating as poetry — and *only* as poetry — can make the nation, vivify it: or, in the language of a late poem like "Passage to India," "claircise" it.

"In the prophetic literature of these states," he had written in 1871 (in "Democratic Vistas"), ". . . Nature, true Nature, and the true idea of Nature, long absent, must, above all, become fully restored, enlarged, and must furnish the pervading atmosphere to poems. . ." And later in the same essay: "The poems of life are great, but there must be poems of the purports of life, not only in itself, but beyond itself." Life beyond life, poetry beyond poetry: This idea came to count for more and more in Whitman's conception of his vocation, and accordingly, of that of the poets who were to come. The last edition (1892) of *Leaves of Grass* is surely the testament of the sort of "divine literatus" whom he had earlier prophesied. Indeed, he had not

only prophesied himself but made the prophecy come true. But, as he acknowledged, this was not the only form of his testament. For, when he wrote of the last edition, "I am determined to have the world know what *I* was pleased to do," he yet recognized: "In the long run the world will do as it pleases with the book." The question remains: How may we use the book so as to know what we please to do with it? And more: What does the book, in its structure and function, in its growth, teach us about the vocation of poet in the modern world? And more: How may it help the poets who yet are to come discover, and so define, their vocation?

The hard fact — so it seems to me — is that Whitman fails as prophetic poet, precisely because he was such a powerfully *humane* poet. The adjective makes us flinch, perhaps; but only because, like Whitman, we have found the beliefs it implies so difficult to hold to that we have come — if not to seek for the prophetic utterances which will offer us something in their stead, then to discount them as disruptive of the high sense of our private selves on which we ground our hopes for the lives we live. Still, it might be that a close reading of Whitman, the poet of 1860 — for it is he whom I suggest we must recover — will teach us what it might be like once more to hold to them. Be that as it may, the record of Whitman's life would suggest that his own power, his own humanity, was at the end too much for him. In any case, when he tried to write prophetic poetry, he came eventually to sacrifice man — that finite creature, locked in time and history, at once agonized and exalted by his humanity — for what he has encouraged some of his advocates again to call cosmic man, the cosmic man of, say, these lines from "Passage to India":

Passage, immediate passage! the blood burns in my veins!
Away O soul! hoist instantly the anchor!
Cut the hawsers — haul out — shake every sail!
Have we not stood here like trees in the ground long enough?
Have we not grovel'd here long enough, eating and drinking
 like mere brutes?
Have we not darken'd and dazed ourselves with books long enough?

Sail forth — steer for the deep waters only,
Reckless O soul, exploring, I with thee, and thou with me,
For we are bound where mariner has not yet dared to go,
And we will risk the ship, ourselves and all.

O my brave soul !
O farther farther sail !
O daring joy, but safe ! are they not all the seas of God ?
O farther, farther, farther sail !

It is the idea of that "daring joy, but safe"—everywhere in the poem—which prevents one from assenting to this passage and all that comes before it. The passage of a soul, whether it is everyman's or a saint's, is not "safe," however "joyful." So that Whitman cannot focus the poem on the sort of *human* experience to which one might assent, because one could acknowledge its essential humanity. The figures in the passage proliferate farther and farther out from whatever center in which they have originated, until one wonders if there ever was a center. Probably not, because the experience of the protagonist in this poem is that of cosmic man, who, because he is everywhere, is nowhere; who, because he can be everything, is nothing. *This* Whitman, I believe, is he who mistakes vivification for creation, the ecstasy of cadence for the ecstasy of belief, efficient cause for final cause, poet for prophet. Which is not, I emphasize, the same as conceiving of the poet *as* prophet.

Whitman's genius was such as to render him incapable of the kind of discipline of the imagination which would make for the genuine sort of prophetic poetry we find in, say, Blake and Yeats: of whom we *can* say that they were poets *as* prophets; for whom we can observe that poetry is the vehicle for prophecy, not its tenor. Whitman is at best, at his best, *visionary*, and sees beyond his world to what it might be—thus, what, failing to be, it is. Blake and Yeats are at best, at their best, *prophetic*, and see through their world to what it really is—thus, what, pretending not to be, it might be. Visionary poetry projects a world which the poet would teach us to acknowledge as our own; it comes to have the uncanniness of the terribly familiar. Prophetic poetry projects a world which the poet would teach us is alien to our own yet central to our seeing it as it really is—a world built upon truths we have hoped in vain to forget. We say of the visionary world that we could have made it—at least in dream-work. We say of the prophetic world that we could not possibly have made it, for it was there already. The ground of visionary poetry is indeed dream-work and magical thought; the ground of prophetic poetry, revelation and mythical thought. Thus the special language of prophetic poetry—one of its most marked formal characteristics—must,

by the definition of its purpose, be foreign to us (for it reveals a world, and the strange things in it, hidden from us); yet, by the paradox of prophecy, it is a language native to us (for the things it reveals, being universal—out of the realm of day-to-day time, space, and conception—put all of us, all of our “actual” world, under their aegis). We can “understand” that language because its grammar and syntax are analogous to our own; understanding it, we assent to—and perhaps believe in—the metaphysical system which its structure and vocabulary entail; trying to account for its origin, we agree with the poet that he has been, in some quite literal sense, “inspired.”

Now, when the mood came over him—as it did increasingly—perhaps Whitman did claim to have been “inspired” in this literal sense. But even so, his later work fails as prophetic poetry (for that is what it is meant to be) precisely because, like the earlier work, it projects not a world to which the poet stands as witness, but one to which he stands as maker. For he asks of the world projected in the later work that, in accordance with the requirements of prophetic poetry, it have the effect of revelation; that its language be at once of and not of our workaday world; that it imply what in “Democratic Vistas” he called a “New World metaphysics.” Yet the editions of *Leaves of Grass* from 1867 on fail of the centrality and integrity of properly prophetic poetry: fail, I think, because the poet mistakenly assumes that poetry, when it is made to deal with the universe at large, *becomes* prophecy. For all his revisions and manipulations of his text, for all his enlargement of his themes, the later Whitman is but a visionary poet. And, since he asks more of it than it can properly yield, the vision, and consequently the poetry, even the conception of the poet, get increasingly tenuous. A certain strength is there, of course. But it is the strength of an earlier Whitman, who perhaps prophesied, but could not bring about, his own metamorphosis from poet to prophet. His genius was too great to let him forget that, after all, it was *poets* who were to come.

True enough, he wrote, toward the end of “A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads”:

But it is not on “Leaves of Grass” distinctively as *literature*, or a specimen thereof, that I feel to dwell, or advance claims. No one will get at my verses who insists upon viewing them as a literary performance, or attempt at such performance, or as aiming mainly toward art or aestheticism.

One says: How right, how sad, how wasteful! For, ironically enough, Whitman's words characterize the *failure* of the 1892 *Leaves of Grass*. And one turns to the earlier Whitman, I daresay the authentic Whitman, whose verses did aim mainly toward art and aestheticism: toward a definition of the vocation of the poet in that part of the modern world which was the United States.

For me, then, the most important edition of *Leaves of Grass* is the 1860 edition; and its most important poem is "A Word Out of the Sea" (which, of course, became "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" in later editions.) Here Whitman may be best justified: as a poet. The burden of this paper will be to justify Whitman's way with poetry in the 1860 volume; to show how the structure and movement of this volume and of some of the principal poems in it (above all, "A Word Out of the Sea") are such as to furnish a valid and integral way for a poet dedicated to saving poetry for the modern world, thus—as poet, and only as poet—dedicated to saving the modern world for poetry. The Whitman of the 1860 *Leaves of Grass* would be a sage, a seer, a sayer. But he speaks of only what he knows directly and he asks of his speech only that it report fully and honestly and frankly, only that it evoke other speeches, other poems, of its kind. The poems in this volume do justify Whitman's claims for poetry in general—but in terms of what he may in fact give us, not of what he would like, or even need, to give us. The strength of the major poems in the volume is that they somehow resist *our* need for more than they present, and make us rest satisfied—or as satisfied as we ever can be—with what they give. Above all, this is true of "A Word Out of the Sea"—as it is less true, and so characteristic of the later Whitman, the poet of "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking."

The 1855, 1856, and 1860 *Leaves of Grass* make a complete sequence—one in which the poet invents modern poetry, explores its possibility as an instrument for studying the world at large and himself as somehow vitally constitutive of it, and comes finally to define, expound, and exemplify the poet's vocation in the modern world. The sequence, in brief, is from language to argument; and it is controlled at all points by a powerful sense of the ego which is struggling to move from language to argument and which must come to realize the limits of its own humanity, which are the limits of argument. If, as we well know, the poet as envisaged in the 1855 and 56 *Leaves of*

Grass is the counterpart of him of whom Emerson wrote in "The Poet" (1844), the poet envisaged in the 1860 *Leaves of Grass* is the counterpart of him of whom Emerson wrote in his essay on Goethe in *Representative Men* (1850): Not Shakespeare, not Plato, not Swedenberg would do for the modern world, which yet "wants its poet-priest, a reconciler. . ." Goethe was one such: "the writer, or secretary, who is to report the doings of the miraculous spirit of life that everywhere throbs and works. His office is a reception of the facts into the mind, and then a selection of the eminent and characteristic experiences." Note: just a "writer"—(what John Holloway in an important book of a few years ago called the *Victorian Sage*: a philosopher of a kind, but one who constructs his argument according to a grammar of assent). Emerson had concluded:

The world is young: the former great men call to us affectionally. We too must write Bibles, to unite again the heavens and the earthly world. The secret of genius is to offer no fiction to exist for us; to realize all that we know; in the high refinement of modern life, in arts, in sciences, in books, in men, to exact good faith, reality and a purpose; and first, last, midst and without end, to honor every truth by use.

The 1860 *Leaves of Grass*, as one of Whitman's notebook entries indicates, was to be a Bible too: "The Great Construction of the New Bible. . . . It ought to be ready in 1859." It was to offer a "third religion," Whitman wrote. And in a way it does; but, for well and for ill, that religion is a religion of man—man as he is, locked in his humanity and needing a religion, yet not claiming to have it by virtue of needing it; not hypnotizing himself into declaring that he has it. (For Whitman a little cadence was a dangerous, if exciting, thing, much cadence, disastrous.) The Whitman of the 1860 *Leaves of Grass* is, *par excellence*, Emerson's "secretary," reporting "the doings of the miraculous spirit of life that everywhere throbs and works." To accept a miracle, to live in its presence, even to try to comprehend it—this is not the same as trying to work one, even claiming to have worked one. And—as the poets who have come after him have variously testified in their puzzled, ambiguous relation to him—Whitman's way with the language of poetry, going against the grain of mass communications and "positivism," may well teach us how to recognize and acknowledge miracles. It cannot teach us how to work them; or even how to earn them. One can well

imagine how hard it must be for a poet to go so far with language, only to discover that he can go no farther. Such a discovery constitutes the principal element of greatness in the 1860 *Leaves of Grass*, perhaps the principal element of greatness in Whitman's poetry as a whole.

I have said that in 1855 Whitman "invented" modern poetry. By this I mean only that, along with other major poets of the middle of the century, he participated—but in a strangely isolated way—in the development of romanticist poetics toward and beyond its symbolist phase. ("To invent" may mean, among other things, "to stumble upon.") I do not mean to claim too much for the word "symbolist" here; I use it only generally to indicate that Whitman too came to realize that a poet's vocation was fatefully tied to the state of the language which constituted his medium. He discovered with Baudelaire—although without Baudelaire's (and incidentally Emerson's) overwhelming sense of the problem of "correspondences," that, as regards language, "tout vit, tout agit, tout se correspond." The medium thus had a "life" of its own, and so might generate "life"—the "life" of poetry. Poetry, on this view, thus became *sui generis*, a unique mode of discourse; and the role of the poet became more and more explicitly to be that of the creator: one who might "free" language to "mean"—a creator in a medium, pure and simple. We have in Whitman's early work a version of that conception of poet and poetry with which we are now so familiar: To whom was the poet responsible? Not to whom, the reply ran, but to what? And the answer: to language. And language as such was seen to be the sole, overriding means to establish, or reestablish, community. The perhaps inevitable drift—not only in Whitman's work but of that of his contemporaries and of the poets who have come after—was toward an idea of poetry as a means of communion, perhaps modern man's sole means of communion, his religion. Professor Abrams (in *The Mirror and the Lamp*) concludes his account of these developments thus:

It was only in the early Victorian period, when all discourse was explicitly or tacitly thrown into the two exhaustive modes of imaginative and rational, expressive and assertive, that religion fell together with poetry in opposition to science, and that religion, as a consequence, was converted into poetry, and poetry into a kind of religion.

Professor Abrams is speaking about developments in England. In

the United States, conditions were somewhat simpler and, withal, more extreme. From the beginning, that is to say, Whitman was sure that the imaginative and rational might well be subsumed under a "higher" category, which was poetry. So that—as I have indicated in my remarks on Whitman and prophetic poetry—for him there was eventually entailed the idea that the New Bible might be just that, a total and inclusive amount of cosmic man, of man as one of an infinitude of gods bound up in Nature. It is a nice question whether or not the "symbolist" dedication to the idea of language-as-communion must *inevitably* lead to a search for a metalinguistic structure of analogies and correspondences and then to an idea of poetry as religion and religion as poetry. And it is a nicer question whether or not "symbolist" poetics—with its emphasis on medium as against matrix, language *per se* as against language-in-culture—is characterized by a certain weakness in linguistic theory. Whitman's work raises these questions; and a full critique of his work would entail a critique of his theory of poetry, thus of his theory of language, thus of his theory of cultre. But this is not the place to speak of critics to come, much less to prophesy them.

In any case, we must grant Whitman his special kind of "unmediated vision." But we are not by that token obliged to grant him, or claim for him, a "mysticism"—or for that matter, "an inverted mysticism"; or to declare that, *ecce*, his poetry is at once "*mystical and irreligious*"; or to see in the Whitman of 1855 a good, (prematurely) grey *guru*. (I cite here the recent claims for this Whitman of James Miller, Karl Shapiro, and Malcolm Cowley—who confuse, or conflate, this poet with the one who presided at Camden. And I think of the question, put with such sweet craziness, by Allen Ginsberg in the lines I have used as epigraph.) At its most telling, Whitman's earlier poetry manifests what has been called (by Erich Kahler) an "existential consciousness," but of a mid-nineteenth-century American sort—its key term, its center of strength and weakness, being not anguish but joy. Or rather, the key term is triumph—as suffering, the poet endures, and rejoices: seeing that it is his vocation as poet to teach men that they can endure. The freedom which ensues is wonderful, not dreaful.

Thus I take the 1855 and 56 editions of *Leaves of Grass*, which most freshly project this mode of consciousness, as stages on the way

to the 1860 edition. In 1855 and 56 Whitman shows that he has learned to report truthfully what he has seen; in 1860, that he has learned to measure its significance for the poet taken as the "secretary"—the archetypal man. He strove to go beyond this, but in vain. The movement from the 1855 to the 1856 editions is the movement from the first "Song of Myself" and the first "The Sleeper" (both originally untitled) to the first "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" (called, in 1856, "Sun-Down Poem"): The poet first learns to discipline himself into regressing deeply into his own pre-conscious; then, with his new-found sense of himself as at once subject and object in his world, he learns to conceive in a new way of the world at large; he is, as though for the first time, "in" the world. The crucial factor is a restoration of the poet's vital relationship to language. A good, powerfully naive account of this discovery is that in Whitman's prose *American Primer*, written in the 1850's, but not published until after his death:

What do you think words are? Do you think words are positive and original things in themselves? No: Words are not original and arbitrary in themselves.—Words are a result—they are the progeny of what has been or is in vogue.—If iron architecture comes in vogue, as it seems to be coming, words are wanted to stand for all about iron architecture, for all the work it causes, for the different branches of work and of the workman. . .

• • •

A perfect user of words uses things—they exude in power and beauty from him—miracles in his hands—miracles from his mouth. . .

• • •

A perfect writer would make words sing, dance, do the male and female act, bear children, weep, bleed, rage, stab, steal, fire cannon, steer ships, sack cities, charge with cavalry or infantry, or do any thing, that man or woman or the natural powers can do. [Note the insistence on "natural"—not "supernatural" powers.]

• • •

Likely there are other words wanted.—Of words wanted, the matter is summed up in this: When the time comes for them to represent any thing or state of things, the words will surely follow. The lack of any words, I say again, is as historical as the existence of words. As for me, I feel a hundred realities, clearly determined in me, that words are not yet formed to represent. . . .

These sentiments generally, and some of these phrasings particularly, got into Whitman's prose meditations. More important, from the beginning they inform the poems. They derive much from Emerson's "The Poet," of course; but they are not tied to even Emerson's modestly transcendental balloon. The power which Whitman discovers is the power of language, fueled by the imagination, to break through the categories of time, space, and matter and to "vivify" (a word, as I have said, he used late in his life — so close to Pound's "Make it new") the persons, places, and things of his world, and so make them available to his readers. In the process — since the readers would, as it were, be using words for the first time — he would make them available to themselves: as poets in spite of themselves.

It is as regards this last claim — that the reader is a poet in spite of himself — that the 1860 *Leaves of Grass* is all-important. For there Whitman most clearly saw that the poet's power to break through the limiting categories of day-to-day existence is just that: a poet's power, obtaining only insofar as the poem obtains, and limited as the poem is limited. In 1860, that is to say, Whitman saw that his Bible was to be a poet's Bible, and had to be built around a conception of the poet's life: his origins, experience, and end; his relation with the persons, places, and things of his world. The 1855 and 56 *Leaves of Grass* volumes are but *collections* of poems — their organization as rushed and chaotic as is the sensibility of the writer of the *American Primer*. Within individual poems, there is form, a form which centers on the moment in the poet's life which they project. But the 1860 *Leaves of Grass* is an articulated whole, with an *argument*. The argument is that of the poet's life as it furnishes a beginning, middle, and end to an account of his vocation. The 1860 volume is, for all its imperfections, one of the great works in that romantic mode, the autobiography. Or, let us give the genre to which it belongs a more specific name: archetypal autobiography. The 1860 volume is autobiographical as, say, *Moby-Dick* and *Walden* are autobiographical: for its hero is a man in the process of writing a book, of writing himself, of making himself, of discovering that the powers of the self are the stronger for being limited. The hero who can say No! in thunder discovers that he can say Yes! in thunder too — but that the thunderation is his own and no one else's.

Now, to say that the 1860 *Leaves of Grass* is quintessentially autobi-

ographical is to say what has been said before: most notably by Schyberg, Asselineau, and Allen. But I mean to say it somewhat differently than they do. For they see in the volume a sign of a crisis in Whitman's personal life; and this is most likely so. Yet I think it is wrong to read the volume as, in this *literal* sense, personal—that is, "private." (The Bowers edition of the surviving MS. of the 1860 edition clearly shows that Whitman—naturally enough, most often in the "Calamus" poems—wanted to keep the book clear of too insistently and privately personal allusions. He was, I think, not trying to "conceal"—much less "mask"—his private personality but to transmute it into an archetypal personality. I think that it is a mistake to look so hard, as some critics do, for the "private" I.) Thus I should read the volume as not personal but archetypal autobiography: yet another version of that compulsively brought-forth nineteenth-century poem which dealt with the growth of the poet's mind. (Well instructed by our forebears, we now have a variety of names for the form—all demonstrating how deeply, and from what a variety of non-literary perspectives, we have had to deal with the issues which it raises for us: *rite de passage*, quest for identity, search for community, and the like.) Whitman's problem, the poet's problem, was to show that integral to the poet's vocation was his life cycle; that the poet, having discovered his gifts, might now use them to discover the relevance of his life, his *lived* life, his *erlebnis*, his *career*, to the lives of his fellows. It is the fact that his newly discovered use of poetry is grounded in his sense of a life lived-through: it is this fact that evidences Whitman's ability here, more than in any version of *Leaves of Grass*, to contain his gift and use it, rather than be used by it. Of this volume Whitman said: "I am satisfied with *Leaves of Grass*, (by far the most of it) as expressing what was intended, namely, to express by sharp-cut self assertion, One's Self & also, or may be still more, to map out, to throw together for American use, a gigantic embryo or skeleton of Personality,—fit for the West, for native models." Later, of course, he wanted more. But he never had the means beyond those in the 1860 edition to get what he wanted. And that has made all the difference.

The 1860 *Leaves of Grass* opens with "Proto-Leaf" (later, much revised, as "Starting from Paumanok.") Here Whitman announces his themes and, as he had done before, calls for his new religion;

Walt Whitman



A Word

Out of the Sea

Reprinted from the 1860 edition of
Leaves of Grass.

OUT of the rocked cradle,
Out of the mocking-bird's throat, the musical shuttle,
Out of the boy's mother's womb, and from the nipples of her breasts,
Out of the Ninth Month midnight,
Over the sterile sands, and the fields beyond, where the child, leaving
 his bed, wandered alone, bareheaded, barefoot,
Down from the showered halo,
Up from the mystic play of shadows, twining and twisting as if they
 were alive,
Out from the patches of briars and blackberries,
From the memories of the bird that chanted to me,
From your memories, sad brother — from the fitful risings and
 fallings I heard,
From under that yellow half-moon, late-risen, and swollen as if with
 tears,
From those beginning notes of sickness and love, there in the
 transparent mist,
From the thousand responses of my heart, never to cease,
From the myriad thence-aroused words,
From the word stronger and more delicious than any,
From such, as now they start, the scene revisiting,
As a flock, twittering, rising, or overhead passing,
Borne hither — ere all eludes me, hurriedly,
A man — yet by these tears a little boy again,
Throwing myself on the sand, confronting the waves,
I, chanter of pains and joys, uniter of here and hereafter,
Taking all hints to use them — but swiftly leaping beyond them,
A reminiscence sing.

REMINISCENCE

1. ONCE, Paumanok,
 When the snows had melted, and the Fifth Month grass was
 growing,
Up this sea-shore, in some briers,
 Two guests from Alabama — two together,
 And their nest, and four light-green eggs, spotted with brown,
 And every day the he-bird, to and fro, near at hand,

And every day the she-bird, crouched on her nest, silent, with
bright eyes,
And every day I, a curious boy, never too close, never disturbing
them,
Cautiously peering, absorbing, translating.

2. *Shine! Shine!*

Pour down your warmth, great Sun!
While we bask — we two together.

3. *Two together!*

Winds blow South, or winds blow North,
Day come white, or night come black,
Home, or rivers and mountains from home,
Singing all time, minding no time,
If we two but keep together.

4. Till of a sudden,

May-be killed, unknown to her mate,
One forenoon the she-bird crouched not on the nest,
Nor returned that afternoon, nor the next,
Nor ever appeared again.

5. And thenceforward, all summer, in the sound of the sea,

And at night, under the full of the moon, in calmer weather,
Over the hoarse surging of the sea,
Or flitting from brier to brier by day,
I saw, I heard at intervals, the remaining one, the he-bird,
The solitary guest from Alabama.

6. *Blow! Blow!*

Blow up sea-winds along Paumanok's shore;
I wait and I wait, till you blow my mate to me.

7. Yes, when the stars glistened,

All night long, on the prong of a moss-scallop'd stake,
Down, almost amid the slapping waves,
Sat the lone singer, wonderful, causing tears.

8. He called on his mate,

He poured forth the meanings which I, of all men, know.

9. Yes, my brother, I know,
The rest might not—but I have treasured every note,
For once, and more than once, dimly, down to the beach gliding,
Silent, avoiding the moonbeams, blending myself with the
shadows,
Recalling now the obscure shapes, the echoes, the sounds and
sights after their sorts.
The white arms out in the breakers tirelessly tossing,
I, with bare feet, a child, the wind wafting my hair,
Listened long and long.

10. Listened, to keep, to sing—now translating the notes,
Following you, my brother.

11. *Soothe! Soothe!*
Close on its wave soothes the wave behind,
And again another behind, embracing and lapping,
every one close,
But my love soothes not me.

12. *Low hangs the moon—it rose late,*
O it is lagging—O I think it is heavy with love.

13. *O madly the sea pushes upon the land,*
With love—with love.

14. *O night!*
O do I not see my love fluttering out here among the breakers?
What is that little black thing I see there in the white?

15. *Loud! Loud!*
Loud I call to you my love!
High and clear I shoot my voice over the waves,
Surely you must know who is here,
You must know who I am, my love.

16. *Low-hanging moon!*
What is that dusky spot in your brown yellow?
O it is the shape of my mate!
O moon, do not keep her from me any longer.

17. *Land! O land!*

*Whichever way I turn, O I think you could give me my mate
back again, if you would,
For I am almost sure I see her dimly whichever way I look.*

18. *O rising stars!*

Perhaps the one I want so much will rise with some of you.

19. *O throat!*

*Sound clearer through the atmosphere!
Pierce the woods, the earth,
Somewhere listening to catch you must be the one I want.*

20. *Shake out, carols!*

*Solitary here — the night's carols!
Carols of lonesome love! Death's carols!
Carols under that lagging, yellow, waning moon!
O, under that moon, where she droops almost down into
the seal!
O reckless, despairing carols.*

21. *But soft!*

*Sink low — soft!
Soft! Let me just murmur,
And do you wait a moment, you husky-noised sea,
For somewhere I believe I heard my mate responding to me,
So faint — I must be still to listen,
But not altogether still, for then she might not come
immediately to me.*

22. *Hither, my love!*

*Here I am! Here!
With this just-sustained note I announce myself to you,
This gentle call is for you, my love.*

23. *Do not be decoyed elsewhere!*

*That is the whistle of the wind — it is not my voice,
That is the fluttering of the spray,
Those are the shadows of leaves.*

24. *O darkness! O in vain!*

O I am very sick and sorrowful.

25. *O brown halo in the sky, near the moon, drooping upon the sea!*
O troubled reflection in the sea!
O throat! O throbbing heart!
O all — and I singing uselessly all the night.
26. *Murmur! Murmur on!*
O murmurs — you yourselves make me continue to sing,
I know not why.
27. *O past! O joy!*
In the air — in the woods — over fields,
Loved! Loved! Loved! Loved! Loved!
Loved — but no more with me,
We two together no more.
28. The aria sinking,
All else continuing — the stars shining,
The winds blowing — the notes of the wondrous bird echoing,
With angry moans the fierce old mother yet, as ever, incessantly
moaning,
On the sands of Paumanok's shore gray and rustling,
The yellow half-moon, enlarged, sagging down, drooping, the
face of the sea almost touching,
The boy extatic — with his bare feet the waves, with his hair
the atmosphere dallying,
The love in the heart pent, now loose, now at last tumultuously
bursting,
The aria's meaning, the ears, the Soul, swiftly depositing,
The strange tears down the cheeks coursing,
The colloquy there — the trio — each uttering,
The undertone — the savage old mother, incessantly crying,
To the boy's Soul's questions sullenly timing — some drowned
secret hissing,
To the outsetting bard of love.
29. Bird! (then said the boy's Soul,)
Is it indeed toward your mate you sing? or is it mostly to me?
For I that was a child, my tongue's use sleeping,
Now that I have heard you,

Now in a moment I know what I am for — I awake,
And already a thousand singers — a thousand songs, clearer,
 louder, more sorrowful than yours,
A thousand warbling echoes have started to life within me,
Never to die.

30. O throes!

O you demon, singing by yourself — projecting me,
O solitary me, listening — never more shall I cease imitating,
 perpetuating you,
Never more shall I escape,
Never more shall the reverberations,
Never more the cries of unsatisfied love be absent from me,
Never again leave me to be the peaceful child I was before what
 there, in the night,
By the sea, under the yellow and sagging moon,
The dusky demon aroused — the fire, the sweet hell within,
The unknown want, the destiny of me.

31. O give me some clew!

O if I am to have so much, let me have more!
O a word! O what is my destination?
O I fear it is henceforth chaos!
O how joys, dreads, convolutions, human shapes, and all shapes,
 spring as from graves around me!
O phantoms! you cover all the land, and all the sea!
O I cannot see in the dimness whether you smile or frown
 upon me;
O vapor, a look, a word! O well-beloved!
O you dear women's and men's phantoms!

32. A word then, (for I will conquer it,)

The word final, superior to all,
Subtle, sent up — what is it? — I listen;
Are you whispering it, and have been all the time, you
 sea-waves?
Is that it from your liquid rims and wet sands?

33. Answering, the sea,
Delaying not, hurrying not,

Whispered me through the night, and very plainly before
daybreak,
Lisp'd to me constantly the low and delicious word DEATH,
And again Death — ever Death, Death, Death,
Hissing melodious, neither like the bird, nor like my aroused
child's heart,
But edging near, as privately for me, rustling at my feet,
And creeping thence steadily up to my ears,
Death, Death, Death, Death.

34. Which I do not forget,
But fuse the song of two together,
That was sung to me in the moonlight on Paumanok's
gray beach,
With the thousand responsive songs, at random,
My own songs, awaked from that hour,
And with them the key, the word up from the waves,
The word of the sweetest song, and all songs,
That strong and delicious word which, creeping to my feet,
The sea whispered me.

but he gives no indication that it is to be a religion of anything else but the poet's universalized vocation. (My misuse of the word "religion" is his. I mean neither to be victimized nor saved by following him here.) It might yet, on this account, be a precursor to a religion, in the more usual (and I think proper) sense, as well as a substitute for it. "Whoever you are! to you endless announcements," he says. There follows "Walt Whitman," a somewhat modified version of the 1855 poem which became "Song of Myself." It is still close to the fluid version of 1855; strangely enough, it is so over-articulated (with some 372 sections) that it does not have the rather massive, and therefore relatively dogmatic, articulation of the final version. In all, it gives us an account of the poet's overwhelming discovery of his native powers. Then in the numbered (but not separately titled) series of poems called "Chants Democratic," the poet — after an apostrophic salutation to his fellows (it ends "O poets to come, I depend on you!") — celebrates himself again, but now as he conceives of himself in the act of celebrating his world. The chief among these poems — as usual, much modified later — became "By Blue Ontario's Shores," "Song of the Broad Axe," "Song for Occupations," "Me Imperturbe," "I Was Looking a Long While," and "I Hear America Singing." Following upon "Walt Whitman," the "Chants Democratic" sequence successfully establishes the dialectical tension between the poet and his world — the tension being sustained as one is made to realize again and again that out of the discovery of his power for "making words do the male and female act" in "Walt Whitman," has come his power to "vivify" his world in the "Chants Democratic."

The transition to "Leaves of Grass," the next sequence — again the poems are numbered, but not separately titled — is natural and necessary. For the poet now asks what it is to make poems in the language which has been precipitated out of the communal experience of his age. The mood throughout is one of a mixture of hope and doubt, and at the end it reaches a certitude strengthened by a sense of the very limitations which initially gave rise to the doubt. The first poem opens — and I shall presently say more about this — with two lines expressing doubt; later — when the prophetic Whitman couldn't conceive of doubting — the lines were dropped in the poem, which became "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of life." The second poem is a version of an 1855 poem, "Great Are the Myths"; and it was finally deleted by

Whitman as being, one guesses, too certain in its rejection of the mythic mode toward which he later found himself aspiring. The third poem, which, combined with the sixth later became "Song of the Answerer," opens up the issue of communication as such. The fourth, a version of an 1856 poem which eventually became "This Compost," conceives of poetry as a kind of naturalistic resurrection. It moves from "Something startles me where I thought I was safest"—that is, in the poet's relation to the materials of poetry—to a simple acknowledgment at the end that the earth "gives such divine materials to men, and accepts such leavings from them at last." The fifth (later "Song of Prudence") considers the insight central to the poet's vocation. To the categories of "time, space, reality," the poet would add that of "prudence"—which teaches that the "consummations" of poetry are such as to envisage the necessary relationship of all other "consummations": the imagination's law of the conservation of energy. The sixth (which, as I have said, later became part of "Song of the Answerer") develops an aspect of the theme of the fourth and fifth; but now that theme is interpreted as it is bound up in the problem of language: "The words of poems give you more than poems,/ They give you to form for yourself poems, religions, politics, war, peace, behavior, histories, essays, romances, and everything else." At this depth of discovery there is no possibility of any kind of logically continuous catalogue of what words "give you to form for yourself." Poetry is a means of exhausting man's powers to know the world, and himself in it, as it is. Beyond this, poems

. . . prepare for death — yet they are not the finish, but
rather the outset,
They bring none to his or her terminus, or to be content and full;
Whom they take, they take into space, to behold the birth
of stars, to learn one of the meanings,
To launch off with absolute faith — to sweep through the ceaseless
rings, and never to be quiet again.

In the seventh poem (later "Faith Poem"), the poet discovers that he "needs no assurances"; for he is (as he says in the eighth poem, later "Miracles") a "realist" and for him the real (by which he means *realia*) constitute "miracles." The poet is led, in the ninth poem (later "There Was a Child Went Forth"), to a recollection of his first discovery of the miraculousness of the real: a discovery he only now

understands; this poem, taken in relation to the rest of the sequence, properly anticipates "A Word out of the Sea." The tenth poem opens, in a passage dropped from the later version, "Myself and Mine,"—but one which is essential as a transition in the sequence:

It is ended—I dally no more,
After to-day I inure myself to run, leap, swim, wrestle, fight . . .

Simply enough: the poet, having accepted his vocation and its constraints, is now free—free *through* it; and he must now teach this freedom to others:

I charge that there be no theory or school founded out of me,
I charge you to leave all free, as I have left all free.

The rest of the sequence, some fourteen more poems, celebrate aspects of the poet's new freedom as it might be the freedom of all men. (I forebear giving their later titles.) It is the freedom to rejoice in the miraculousness of the real, and has its own costs. The greatest is a terrible passivity, as though in order to achieve his freedom, man had to offer himself up as the victim of his own newly vivified sensibility. Being as he is, the poet sees (in 12) "the vast similitude [which] interlocks. . . ."; yet he must admit (in 15) "that life cannot exhibit all to me—" and "that I am to wait for what will be exhibited by death." He is (in 17) the man who must "sit and look out upon all the sorrows of the world, and upon all oppression and shame"; and he must "See, hear, [be] silent," only then to speak. He declares (in 20) ". . . whether I continue beyond this book, to maturity/ . . . / Depends . . . upon you/ . . . you, contemporary America." Poem 24, wherein the poet completes his archetypal act, and gives himself over to his readers, reads:

Lift me close to your face till I whisper,
What you are holding is in reality no book, nor part of a book,
It is a man, flushed and full-blooded—it is I—*So long!*
We must separate—Here! take from my lips this kiss,
Whoever you are, I give it especially to you;
So long—and I hope we shall meet again.

I quote this last poem entire, because I want to make it clear that the lapses into desperate sentimentality—and this poem is a prime example—are intrinsically a part of Whitman's autobiographical mode in the 1860 *Leaves of Grass*, as they are of the mode, or genre, which they represent. It will not do to explain them away by

putting them in a larger context, or considering them somehow as masked verses—evidences of Whitman the shape-shifter. (Speaking through a *persona*, the poet perforce hides behind it.) Confronting the agonies and ambiguities of his conception of the poet, Whitman too often fell into bathos or sentimentalism. Yet bathos and sentimentalism, I would suggest, are but unsuccessful means—to be set against evidence of successful means—of solving the archetypal autobiographer's central problem: at once being himself and seeing himself; of bearing witness to his own deeds. If what he is, as he sees it, is too much to bear; if he is incapable of bearing it; if his genius is such as not to have prepared him to bear it—why then, his miraculism will fail him precisely because he cannot stand too much reality.

Bathos and sentimentalism—and also anxious, premonitory yearnings for something beyond mere poetry—inevitably mar the rest of the 1860 *Leaves of Grass*: but not fatally, since they are the by-products of its total argument. At some point, most foxes want to be hedgehogs. Whitman is a poet who must be read at large. And I am claiming that Whitman can be best read at large in the 1860 *Leaves of Grass*. When he can be read in smaller compass—as in “A Word Out of the Sea”—it is because in a single poem he manages to recapitulate in little what he was developing at large. I should guess—as I shall presently try to show—that the large poem, the 1860 volume, is a necessary setting for the little poem, “A Word Out of the Sea.” That poem (later, I remind my reader, “Out of the Cradle . . .”) is one of Whitman’s greatest. And I shall want to show that it is even greater than we think. So I must carry through, however cursorily, my glance o’er the 1860 *Leaves of Grass*. There comes next a series of poems (“A Word Out of the Sea” is one of them) in which the poet meditates the sheer givenness of the world his poems reveal; he is even capable of seeing himself as one of the givens. But then he must specify in detail the nature of his kind of givenness: which includes the power to give, to bring the given to a new life. Here—after “Salut au Monde,” “Poem of Joys,” “A Word Out of the Sea,” “A Leaf of Faces,” and “Europe”—there is first the “Enfans d’Adam” sequence; and then, after an interlude of generally celebrative poems, the “Calamus” sequence. I want to say of these two sequences only that they are passionate in a curiously objective fashion; I have suggested that the proper word for their mood and tone is neither personal nor impersonal, but archetypal. In

context, they furnish analogues—directly libidinal analogues, as it were—for the poet's role, seen now not (as in the earlier sequences) from the point of view of a man telling us how he has discovered his gift, put it to use, and measured the cost of using it properly; but seen rather from the point of view of the reader. The "I" of these poems, I suggest, is meant to include the reader—as at once potential poet and reader of poems. So that the "Enfans d'Adam" sequence tell us how it is—what it means, what it costs—to be a maker of poems and the "Calamus" sequence how it is to be a reader of poems—in the first instance the analogue is procreation; in the second it is community. And if Whitman's homosexuality led him to write more powerfully in the second vein than in the first, we can well afford to be grateful for the fact that we can learn from these poems, as from few others, to understand everyman's potential for "alienation" as Whitman has the power to evoke and define it for us.

That understanding is carried through to the end—as Whitman announces in the next-to-last of the "Calamus" sequence that we are to be ready for his most "baffling" words, which come in the last poem of the sequence, later "Full of Life Now:

When you read these, I, that was visible, am become invisible;
Now it is you, compact, visible, realizing my poems, seeking me,
Fancying how happy you were, if I could be with you, and become
your lover;

Be it as if I were with you. Be not too certain but I am with you now.

Later Whitman changed "lover" to "comrade"—mistakenly, I think; for, as their function in the 1860 volume shows, the "Calamus" poems were to carry through to completion the poet's conception of his painfully loving relation with his readers.

Having, in the "Enfans d'Adam" and "Calamus" sequences, defined the poetic process itself, as he had earlier defined the poet's discovery of that process, Whitman proceeds variously to celebrate himself and his readers at once under the aegis of the "Enfans d'Adam" and the "Calamus" analogue. (As Lorca said in his "Oda," "Este es el mundo, amigo. . . .") Much of the power of the poems, new and old, derives from their place in the sequences. In "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" and the series of "Messenger Leaves" there are addresses to all and sundry who inhabit Whitman's world, assurances to them that now he can love them for what they are, because now he

knows them for what they are. There is then an address to Manahatta — which returns to the problem of naming, but now with an assurance that the problem has disappeared in the solving: "I was asking for something specific and perfect for my city, and behold! here is the aboriginal name!" Then there is an address in "Kosmos" to the simple, separate persons — to each of his readers who is "constructing the house of himself or herself." Then there is "Sleep Chasings" (a version of the 1855 "The Sleepers"), now a sublime poem, in which the poet can freely acknowledge that the source of his strength is in the relation of his night — to his day-time life, the unconscious and the conscious:

I will stop only a time with the night, and rise betimes

I will duly pass the day, O my mother, and duly return to you.

And "Sleep Chasings" is the more telling for being followed by "Burial" (originally an 1855 poem which eventually became "To Think of Time"). For in his incessant moving between night and day, the poet manages to make poems and so proves immortal. He makes men immortal in his poems, as he teaches them to make themselves immortal in their acts:

To think that you and I did not see, feel, think, nor bear our part!

To think that we are now here, and bear our part!

This poem comes virtually at the end of the 1860 volume. Only an address to his soul — immortal, but in a strictly "poetic" sense — and "So Long!" follow. In the latter we are reminded once again:

This is no book,

Who touches this book, touches a man,

(Is it night? Are we alone?)

It is I you hold, and who holds you,

I spring from the pages into your arms — decease calls me forth.

We are reminded thus, to paraphrase a recent Whitmanian, that in the flesh of art we are immortal: which is a commonplace. We are reminded also that in our age, the role of art, of poetry, is to keep us alive enough to be capable of this kind of immortality: which is not quite a commonplace.

• • •

The central terms in the argument of the 1860 *Leaves of Grass*, I suggest, run something like this: first, in the poems which lead up to "A Word Out of the Sea" — self-discovery, self-love, rebirth, diffusion-of-self, art; and second, in the poems which follow "A Word Out of

the Sea"—love-of-others, death, rebirth, reintegration-of-self, art, immortality. The sequence is that of an ordinary life, extraordinarily lived through; the claims are strictly humanistic. The child manages somehow to achieve adulthood; the movement is from a poetry of diffusion to a poetry of integration. Immortality is the *result* of art, not its origin, nor its cause. The humanism is painful, because one of its crucial elements (centering on "death" as a "clew" in "A Word out of the Sea") is an acknowledgment of all-too-human limitations and constraints. So long as Whitman lived with that acknowledgment, lived *in* that acknowledgment—even when living with it drove him (as it too often did) toward bathos and sentimentalism—, he managed to be a poet, a "secretary," a "sage," a seer, a visionary. His religion was the religion of humanity: the only religion that a work of art can *directly* express, whatever other religion it may confront and acknowledge. *Indirectly*, it *can* confront religion in the more usual and more proper, sense; for it can treat of man in his aspiration for something beyond manhood, even if it cannot claim—since its materials are ineluctably those of manhood—to treat directly of that something-beyond. The burden—someone has called it the burden of incertitude; Keats called it "negative capability"—is a hard one to bear. Whitman, I am suggesting, bore it most successfully, bore it most successfully for us, in the 1860 *Leaves of Grass*.

Which brings me to the most important of the poems first collected in this volume, "A Word Out of the Sea." It was originally published separately in 1859, as "A Child's Reminiscence." Thus far, I have tried to suggest the proper context in which the poem should be read: as part of the volume for which it was originally written; as a turning point in the argument of that book. Note that "A Word Out of the Sea" comes about mid-way in the book after "Walt Whitman," the "Chants Democratic," "Leaves of Grass," "Salut au Monde," and "Poem of Joys"—that is, after those poems which tell us of the poet's discovery of his powers as poet and of his ability to use those powers so to "vivify" his world, and himself in it: after his discovery that it is man's special delight and his special agony to be at once the subject and object of his meditations; after his discovery that consciousness inevitably entails self-consciousness and a sense of the strengths and weaknesses of self-consciousness. Moreover, "A Word Out of the Sea" comes shortly before the "Enfans d'Adam" and "Calamus" sequences

—that is, shortly before those poems which work out the dialectic of the subject-object relationship under the analogue of the sexuality of man as creator of his world and of persons, places, and things as its creatures. I cannot but think that Whitman knew what he was doing when he placed "A Word Out of the Sea" thus. For he was obligated, in all his autobiographical honesty, to treat directly of man's fallibilities as well as his powers, to try to discover the binding relationship between fallibilities and powers: to estimate the capacity of man to be himself and the cost he would have to pay. The poems which come before "A Word Out of the Sea" have little to do with fallibilities; they develop the central terms of the whole argument only this far: self-discovery, self-love, rebirth, art. Theirs is the polymorph perverse world of the child. In them, death only threatens, does not promise; power is what counts. The turning-point in the poet's life can come only with the "adult" sense of love and death, the beginning and the end of things: out of which issues art, now a mode of immortality. In "A Word Out of the Sea" the 1860 volume has its turning-point. Beyond this poem, we must remember, are the "Enfans d'Adam" and "Calamus" sequences, and also "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" and the "Messenger Leaves" sequence.

The 1860 poem begins harshly: "Out of the rocked cradle." The past participle, unlike the present participle in the later versions, implies no agent for the rocking; the sea here is too inclusive to be a symbol; it is just a fact of life—life's factuality. Then comes the melange of elements associated with the "sea." They are among the realities whose miraculousness the poet is on his way to understanding. Note the third line (omitted in later versions) which clearly establishes the autobiographical tone and makes the boy at once the product of nature at large and a particular nature: "Out of the boy's mother's womb, from the nipples of her breasts." All this leads to a clear split in point of view, so that we know that the poet-as-adult is making a poem which will be his means to understanding a childhood experience. Initially we are told of the range of experiences out of which this poem comes: the sea as rocked cradle seems at once literally (to the boy) and metaphorically (to the poet) to "contain" the song of the bird, the boy's mother, the place, the time, the memory of the brother, and the as yet unnamed "word stronger and more delicious than any" which marks a limit to the meaning of the whole. This is

quite explicitly an introduction. For what follows is given a separate title, "Reminiscence," as though the poet wanted to make quite plain the division between his sense of himself as child and as adult. Then we are presented with the story of the birds, the loss of the beloved, and the song sung (as only *now* the poet knows it) to objectify this loss, so make it bearable, so assure that it can, in *this* life, be transcended. Always we are aware that the poet-as-adult, the creative center of the poem, seeks that "word stronger and more delicious" which will be his means finally to understand his reminiscences and—in the context of this volume (I emphasize: in the context of *this* volume)—serve to define his vocation as poet: at once powerful and fallible. The points of view of bird, child, and adult are kept separate until the passage which reads:

Bird! (then said the boy's Soul,)
Is it indeed toward your mate you sing? or is it mostly to me?
For I that was a child, my tongue's use sleeping,
Now that I have heard you,
Now in a moment I know what I am for—I awake,
And already a thousand singers—a thousand songs, clearer
louder, more sorrowful than yours,
A thousand warbling echoes have started to life within me,
Never to die.

The boy, even as a man recalling his boyhood, does not, as in later versions, at first address the bird as "Demon." He is at this stage incapable of that "or"—in the later reading "Demon or bird." Even though his soul speaks, he is to discover—some lines later—his special "poetic" relation to the bird. Moreover, as "boy," he holds toward death an attitude halfway between that of the bird—who is merely "instructive" and that of the man—who is "reflective," capable of "reminiscence." Yet the points of view begin to be hypnotically merged—*after* the fact. In the boy's "soul" the poet discovers a child's potentiality for adult knowledge; but he keeps it as a potentiality, and he never assigns it to the bird, who (or which) is an occasion merely. Yet having seen that potentiality as such, he can "now," in the adult present, work toward its realization, confident that the one will follow necessarily in due course from the other. Now, in the adult present, he can ask for "the clew," "The word final, superior to all," the word which "now" he can "conquer." I cannot emphasize too much that

it is a "word"—that the poet is translating the sea (and all it embodies) as pre-linguistic fact into a word, knowledge of which will signify his coming to maturity. "Out of," in the original title, is meant quite literally to indicate a linguistic transformation. In the record of the growth of his mind, he sees *now* that the word will once and for all precipitate the meaning he has willed himself to create, and in the creating to discover. And it comes as he recalls that time when the sea, manifesting the rhythm of life and death itself, the sea, manifesting the rhythm of life and death itself,

Delaying not, hurrying not,
Whispered me through the night, and very plainly before daybreak,
Lisp'd to me the low and delicious word DEATH,
And again Death—ever Death, Death, Death. . . .

(Not "Death," merely repeated four times as in later versions—but "ever," beyond counting. The prophetic Whitman was bound to drop that "ever," since for him nothing was beyond counting.)

The merging of the points of view occurs as not only past and present, child and adult, but subject and object (i.e., "The sea. . . whispered me"—not "to me") are fused. The poet now knows the word, because he has contrived a situation in which he can control its use; he has discovered (to recall the language of the *American Primer* notes) another reality, one that words until *now* had not been formed to represent. He has, as only a poet can, *made* a word out of the sea—for the duration of the poem understood "sea" as it may be into "Death"—"ever Death." His genius is such as to have enabled us to put those quotation marks around the word—guided by him, to have "bracketed" this portion of our experience with language; and we discover that as language binds us in the poet's time, so it is bound in human time.

If the end of the poem is to understand cosmic process as a continual loss of the beloved through death and a consequent gain of death-in-life and life-in-death—if this is the end of the poem, nonetheless it is gained through a creative act, an assertion of life in the face of death, and a discovery and acknowledgement of the limits of such an assertion. And this act is that of the very person, the poet, whom death would deprive of all that is beloved in life. Moreover, the deprivation is quite literally that and shows the poet moving, in high honesty, from the "Enfans d'Adam" sequence to "Calamus." In the 1860 vol-

ume, "A Word Out of the Sea" entails the "Calamus" sequence. (What if Whitman had, in "A Word Out of the Sea," written "comrade" instead of "brother"?)

In any case, at this stage of his career, Whitman would not yield to his longing for such comfort as would scant the facts of life and death. There is, I repeat, that opening "rocked," not "rocking" cradle; there is the quite naturalistic acknowledgement of the "boy's mother's womb." And there is stanza 31 (the stanzas in the 1860 poem are numbered, as the stanzas of the final version are not):

O give me some clew !
O if I am to have so much, let me have more !
O a word ! O what is my destination ?
O I fear it is henceforth chaos !
O how joys, dreads, convolutions, human shapes, and
 all shapes, spring as from graves around me !
O phantoms ! you cover all the land, and all the sea !
O I cannot see in the dimness whether you smile or
 frown upon me ;
O vapor, a look, a word ! O well-beloved !
O you dear women's and men's phantoms !

In the final version, the equivalent stanza reads only:

O give me the clew (it lurks in the night here somewhere,)
O if I am to have so much, let me have more !

The difference between "some clew" and "the clew" marks the difference between a poet for whom questions are real and one for whom questions are rhetorical. The later Whitman was convinced that the lurking clew would find him—and to that degree, whatever else he was, was not a poet. The earlier Whitman, in all humility, feared that what might issue out of this experience was "phantoms"—a good enough word for aborted poems. And often—but not too often—he was right.

Finally, there is not in "A Word Out of the Sea" the falsely (and, in the context of the poem, undeservedly) comforting note of "Or like some old crone rocking the cradle, swathed in sweet garments, bending aside." Indeed, the sentimentality and bathos of this too-much celebrated line, as I think, is given away by the fact that it is the only simile, the only "like" clause, in the poem. And, in relation to the total effect of the poem, the strategic withdrawal of the "Or" which introduces the line is at least unfortunate, at most disastrous.

I make so much of the kind of disaster, as I think it is, because it became increasingly characteristic of Whitman's way with poetry after the 1860 *Leaves of Grass*. Probably there are poems, written later, which show him at his best; and probably some of his revisions and rejections are for the best. But I more and more doubt it, as I doubt that he had reached his best in 1855 and 1856. I do not mean to take the part of Cassandra; but I think it as inadvisable to take the part of Pollyanna. The facts, as I see them, show that Whitman, for whatever reason, after 1860 moved away from the mode of archetypal autobiography toward that of prophecy. He worked hard to make, as he said, a cathedral out of *Leaves of Grass*. He broke up the beautifully wrought sequence of the 1860 volume; so that, even when he let poems stand unrevised, they appear in contexts which take from them their life-giving mixture of tentativeness and assurance, of aspiration, and render them dogmatic, tendentious, and overweening.

In Lawrence's word, Whitman "mentalized" his poems. To give a few examples of "mentalizing" revisions of 1860 poems: The opening of the third "Enfants d'Adam" poem reads in the 1860 text:

O my children! O mates!
O the bodies of you, and of all men and women, engirth
me, and I engirth them.

In the 1867 version the lines read:

I sing the body electric,
The armies of those I love engirth me and I engirth them.

Another example: the opening line of the fourteenth poem of the same sequence — reads in the 1860 version: "I am he that aches with love"; and becomes in 1867: "I am he that aches with amorous love." (This is the "amorous" which so infuriated Laurence.) And another example: the opening lines of the fifteenth poem in the sequence — read in the 1860 version: "Early in the morning,/Walking . . ."; and becomes in 1867: "As Adam early in the morning,/Walking. . ." Small examples surely. But note the unsupported and unsupportable claims of "body electric," "armies," "amorous," and the Old Testament "Adam."

A larger — but still characteristic — example is Whitman's revision of the first of the 1860 "Leaves of Grass" sequence, which became "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of life." The 1860 poem opens thus:

Elemental drifts!
O I wish I could impress others as you and the waves

have just been impressing me.

As I ebbed with an ebb of the ocean of life,
As I wended the shores I know.

In the poem as it appears in the 1892 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, the first two lines—expressing doubt, as I have pointed out—are missing; the third has been simplified to “As I ebb’d with the ocean of life”—so that the poet is no longer conceived as part of an “ebb.” And the fourth line stands as we have it now. Later in the seventh line of the 1892 version, the poet says that he is “Held by this electric self out of the pride of which I utter poems.” In the 1860 version he says that he is “Alone, held by the eternal self of me that threatens to get the better of me, and stifle me.” And so it goes—all passion beyond spending (unless vivified by a kind of cosmic electroshock), all poetry beyond the mere writing, all life beyond the mere living—since the poet’s tactic, however unconscious, is to claim to have transcended that which must have been hard to live with: his extraordinarily ordinary self and the ordinarily extraordinary death that awaits him. Granting the mood and movement of the later editions of *Leaves of Grass*, it is only proper that Whitman would have rejected the eighth poem in the 1860 “Calamus” sequence—which begins “Long I thought that knowledge alone would suffice me—O if I could but obtain knowledge!” and ends, as the poet is brought to confront the readers to whom he would offer his poems, “I am indifferent to my own songs—I will go with him I love . . .”

One more example: this one not of a revision but of an addition to a sequence originating in the 1860 volume. In the 1871 *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman, now wholly committed to making of his poem a series of prophetic books, placed in the "Calamus" sequence the woolly "Base of All Metaphysics," the last stanza of which reads:

to friend,
Of the well-married husband and wife, of children and parents,
Of city for city and land for land.

Whitman stuck by this poem until the end, and it went unchanged into the 1892 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, contributing its bit to the "mentalizing" of the whole. And it is only too typical of additions to the book made from 1867 on.

This Whitman begins to take over *Leaves of Grass* in the 1867 edition and is fully in command by the time of the 1871 edition. It is, unhappily, he whom we know best and he with whom our poets have tried to make their pacts and truces—but, as I think, so that during the uneasy peace they might come to know another (and, as I have tried to show, earlier) Whitman: whose way with the poetry they seem to sense but can never quite get to. The way to that Whitman is not impassable, although working with the Inclusive Edition of *Leaves of Grass* (upon whose variant readings I have depended) is tedious. But there is yet a more direct way: reading the 1860 *Leaves of Grass*.

Meantime we must bring ourselves to say of the Whitman of 1892, the literatus, that he was driven to claim prophetic powers, not to put poetry to their service. Nothing could hold this Whitman back, not even the facts of a poet's life. Indeed, life—his own and life in general—became less "factual," less "real" for him. And—since justification consists in deriving the necessary from the real, of tracing the necessary back to its roots in the real, of showing that the real is necessary—he no longer had a need to justify himself. Well: In this our world, where we too find it increasingly hard to assent to the factually real, where we have got so far as to call the factually real the "absurd," we find it increasingly difficult to hold ourselves back: as do our poets, acting on our behalf. Thus I daresay we need to recover the Whitman of 1860—with his heroic sense of grounding the necessary in the real. He gave us permission to. I am suggesting that we *need* the poet of 1860, the poet of "A Word out of the Sea." I mean to say thereby that our poets need him too. And justifying the need, we must justify him who contrived that his need be archetypal for ours.

Order of Insects

We certainly had no complaints about the house after all we had been through in the other place, but we hadn't lived there very long before I began to notice every morning the bodies of a large black bug spotted about the downstairs carpet; haphazardly, as earthworms must die on the street after a rain; looking when I first saw them like rolls of dark wool or pieces of mud from the children's shoes, or sometimes, if the drapes were pulled, so like ink stains or deep burns they terrified me, for I had been intimidated by that thick rug very early and the first week had walked over it wishing my bare feet would swallow my shoes. The shells were usually broken. Legs and other parts I couldn't then identify would be scattered near like flakes of rust. Occasionally I would find them on their backs, their quilted undersides showing orange, while beside them were smudges of dark brown powder that had to be vacuumed carefully. We believed our cat had killed them. She was frequently sick during the night then—a rare thing for her—and we could think of no other reason. Overturned like that they looked pathetic even dead.

I could not imagine where the bugs had come from. I am terribly meticulous myself. The house was clean, the cupboards tight and orderly, and we never saw one alive. The other place had been infested with those flat brown fuzzy roaches, all wires and speed, and we'd seen *them* all right, frightened by the kitchen light, sifting through the baseboards and the floor's cracks; and in the pantry I had nearly closed my fingers on one before it fled, tossing its shadow across the starch like an image of the startle in my hand.

Dead, overturned, their three pairs of legs would be delicately drawn up and folded shyly over their stomachs. When they walked I suppose their forelegs were thrust out and then bent to draw the body up. I still wonder if they jumped. More than once I've seen

our cat hook one of her claws under a shell and toss it in the air, crouching while the insect fell, feigning leaps—but there was daylight; the bug was dead; she was not really interested anymore; and she would walk immediately away. That image takes the place of jumping. Even if I actually saw those two black pairs of legs unhinge, as they would have to if one leaped, I think I'd find the result unreal and mechanical, a poor try measured by that sudden, high, head-over-heels flight from our cat's paw. I could look it up I guess but it's no study for a woman . . . bugs.

At first I reacted as I should, bending over, wondering what in the world; yet even before I recognized them I'd withdrawn my hand, shuddering. Fierce, ugly, armored things: they used their shadows to seem large. The machine sucked them up while I looked the other way. I remember the sudden thrill of horror I had hearing one rattle up the wand. I was relieved that they were dead, of course, for I could never have killed one, and if they have been popped, alive, into the dust bag of the cleaner, I believe I would have had nightmares again as I did the time my husband fought the red ants in our kitchen. All night I lay awake thinking of the ants alive in the belly of the machine, and when towards morning I finally slept I found myself in the dreadful elastic tunnel of the suction tube where ahead of me I heard them: a hundred bodies rustling in the dirt.

I never think of their species as alive but as comprised entirely by the dead ones on our carpet, all the new dead manufactured by the action of some mysterious spoor—perhaps that dust they sometimes lie in—carried in the air, solidified by night and shaped, from body into body, spontaneously, as maggots were before the age of science. I have a single book about insects, a little dated handbook in French which a good friend gave me as a joke—because of my garden, the quaintness of the plates, the fun of reading about worms in such an elegant tongue—and my bug has his picture there climbing the stem of an orchid. Beneath the picture is his name: *Periplaneta orientalis* L. *Ces répugnantes insectes ne sont que trop communs dans les cuisines des vieilles habitations des villes, dans les magasins, entrepôts, boulangeries, brasseries, restaurants, dans la cale des navires, etc.*, the text begins. Nevertheless they are a new experience for me and I think I am grateful for it now.

The picture didn't need to show me there were two, adult and

nymph, for by that time I'd seen the bodies of both kinds. Nymph. My god the names we use. The one was dark, squat, ugly, sly. The other, slimmer, had hard sheath-like wings drawn over its back like another shell, and you could see delicate interwoven lines spun like fossil gauze across them. The nymph was a rich golden color deepening in its interstices to mahogany. Both had legs that looked under a glass like the canes of a rose, and the nymph's were sufficiently transparent; in a good light you thought you saw its nerves merge and run like a jagged crack to each ultimate claw.

Tipped, their legs have fallen shut, and the more I look at them the less I believe my eyes. Corruption, in these bugs, is splendid. I've a collection now I keep in typewriter ribbon tins, and though, in time, their bodies dry and the interior flesh decays, their features hold, as I suppose they held in life, an Egyptian determination, for their protective plates are strong and death must break bones to get in. Now that the heavy soul is gone, the case is light.

I suspect if we were as familiar with our bones as with our skin, we'd never bury dead but shrine their in their rooms, arranged as we might like to find them on a visit; and our enemies, if we could steal their bodies from the battle sites, would be museumed as they died, the steel still eloquent in their sides, their metal hats askew, the protective toes of their shoes unworn, and friend and enemy would be so wondrously historical that in a hundred years we'd find the jaws still hung for the same speech and all the parts we spent our life with tilted as they always were—rib cage, collar, skull—still repetitious, still defiant, angel light, still worthy of memorial and affection. After all, what does it mean to say that when our cat has bitten through the shell and put confusion in the pulp, the life goes out of them? Alas for us, I want to cry, our bones are secret, showing last, so we must love what perishes: the muscles and the waters and the fats.

Two prongs extend like daggers from the rear. I suppose I'll never know their function. That kind of knowledge doesn't take my interest. At first I had to screw my eyes down, and as I consider it now the whole change, the recent alteration in my life, was the consequence of finally coming near to something. It was a self-mortifying act, I recall, a penalty I laid upon myself for the evil tempered words I'd shouted at my children in the middle of the night. I felt instinctively the insects were infectious and their own disease, so when I knelt I

held a handkerchief over the lower half of my face . . . saw only horror . . . turned, sick, masking my eyes . . . yet the worst of angers held me through the day: vague, searching, guilty, and ashamed.

After that I came near often; saw, for the first time, the gold nymph's difference; put between the mandibles a tinted nail I'd let grow long; observed the movement of the jaws, the stalks of the antennae, the skull shaped skull, the lines banding the abdomen, and found an intensity in the posture of the shell, even when tipped, like that in the gaze of Gauguin's natives' eyes. The dark plates glisten. They are wonderfully shaped, even the buttons of the compound eyes show a geometrical precision which prevents my earlier horror. It isn't possible to feel disgust toward such an order. Nevertheless, I reminded myself, a roach . . . and you a woman.

I no longer own my own imagination. I suppose they came up the drains or out of the registers. It may have been the rug they wanted. Crickets, too, I understand, will feed on wool. I used to rest by my husband . . . stiffly . . . waiting for silence to settle in the house, his sleep to come, and then the drama of their passage would take hold of me, possess me so completely that when I finally slept I merely passed from one dream to another without the slightest loss of vividness or continuity. Never alive, they came with punctures; their bodies formed from little whorls of copperish dust which in the downstairs darkness I couldn't possibly have seen; and they were dead and upside down when they materialized, for it was in that moment that our cat, herself darkly invisible, leaped and brought her paws together on the true soul of the roach; a soul so static and intense, so immortally arranged, I felt, while I lay shell-like in our bed, turned inside out, driving my mind away, it was the same as the dark soul of the world itself—and it was this beautiful and terrifying feeling that took possession of me finally, stiffened me like a rod beside my husband, played caesar to my dreams.

The weather drove them up, I think . . . moisture in the tubes of the house. The first I came on looked put together in Japan; broken, one leg bent under like a metal cinch; unwound. It rang inside the hollow of the wand like metal too; brightly, like a stream of pins. The clatter made me shiver. Well I always see what I fear. Anything my eyes have is transformed into a threatening object: mud, or stains, or burns, or if not these, then toys in unmendable metal

pieces. Not fears to be afraid of. The ordinary fears of daily life. Healthy fears. Womanly, wifely, motherly ones: the children may point at the wretch with the hunch and speak in a voice he will hear; the cat has fleas again, they will get in the sofa; one's face looks smeared, it's because of the heat; is the burner on under the beans? the washing machine's obscure disease may reoccur, it rumbles on rinse and rattles on wash; my god it's already eleven o'clock; which one of you has lost a galosh? So it was amid the worries of our ordinary life I bent, innocent and improperly armed, over the bug that had come undone. Let me think back on the shock. . . . My hand would have fled from a burn with the same speed; anyone's death or injury would have weakened me as well; and I could have gone cold for a number of reasons, because I felt in motion in me my own murderous disease, for instance; but none could have produced the revulsion that dim recognition did, a reaction of my whole nature that flew ahead of understanding and made me withdraw like a spider.

I said I was innocent. Well I was not. Innocent. My god the names we use. What do we live with that's alive we haven't tamed—people like me?—even our houseplants breathe by our permission. All along I had the fear of what it was—something ugly and poisonous, deadly and terrible—the simple insect, worse and wilder than fire—and I should rather put my arms in the heart of a flame than in the darkness of a moist and webby hole. But the eye never ceases to change. When I examine my collection now it isn't any longer roaches I observe but gracious order, wholeness, and divinity. . . . My handkerchief, that time, was useless. . . . O my husband, they are a terrible disease.

. . . the dark soul of the world . . . a phrase I should laugh at. The roach-shell sickened me. And my jaw has broken open. I lie still, listening, but there is nothing to hear. Our cat is quiet. They pass through life to immortality between her paws.

Am I grateful now my terror has another object? From time to time I think so, but I feel as though I'd been entrusted with a kind of eastern mystery, sacred to a dreadful god, and I am full of the sense of my unworthiness and the clay of my vessel. So strange. It is the sewing machine that has the fearful claw. I live in a scatter of blocks and children's voices. The chores are my clock, and time is every

other moment interrupted. I had always thought that love knew nothing of order and that life itself was turmoil and confusion. Let us leap, let us shout! I have leaped, and to my shame, I have wrestled. But this bug that I hold in my hand and know to be dead is beautiful, and there is a fierce joy in its composition that beggars every other, for its joy is the joy of stone, and it lives in its tomb like a lion.

I don't know which is more surprising: to find such order in a roach, or such ideas in a woman.

I could not shake my point of view, infected as it was, and I took up their study with a manly passion. I sought out spiders and gave them sanctuary; played host to worms of every kind; was generous to katydids and lacewings, aphids, ants and various grubs; pampered several sorts of beetle; looked after crickets; sheltered bees; aimed my husband's chemicals away from the grasshoppers, mosquitoes, moths, and flies. I have devoted hours to watching caterpillars feed. You can see the leaves they've eaten passing through them; their bodies thin and swell until the useless pulp is squeezed in perfect rounds from their rectal end; for caterpillars are a simple section of intestine, a decorated stalk of yearning muscle, and their whole being is enlisted in the effort of digestion. *Le tube digestif des Insectes est situé dans le grand axe de la cavité générale du corps . . . de la bouche* *situé dans le grand axe de la cavité générale du corps . . . de la bouche vers l'anus . . . Le pharynx . . . L'oesophage . . . Le jabot . . . Le ventricule chyliflique . . . Le rectum et l'iléon . . .* Yet when they crawl their curves conform to graceful laws.

My children ought to be delighted with me as my husband is, I am so diligent it seems, on their behalf, but they have taken fright and do not care to pry or to collect. My hobby's given me a pair of dreadful eyes, and sometimes I fancy they start from my head; yet I see, perhaps, no differently than Galileo saw when he found in the pendulum its fixed intent. Nonetheless my body resists such knowledge. It wearies of its edge. And I cannot forget, even while I watch our moonvine blossoms opening, the simple principle of the bug. It is a squat black cockroach after all, such a bug as frightens housewives, and it's only come to chew on rented wool and find its death absurdly in the teeth of the renter's cat.

Strange. Absurd. I am the wife of the house. This point of view I tremble in is the point of view of a god, and I feel certain, some-

how, that could I give myself entirely to it, were I not continuing a woman, I could disarm my life, find peace and order everywhere; and I lie by my husband and I touch his arm and consider the temptation. But I am a woman. I am not worthy. Then I want to cry o husband, I am ill, for I have seen what I have seen. What should he do at that, poor man, starting up in the night from his sleep to such nonsense, but comfort me blindly and murmur dream, small snail, only dream, bad dream, as I do to the children. I could go away like the wise cicada who abandons its shell to move to other mischief. I could leave and let my bones play cards and spank the children. . . . Peace. How can I think of such ludicrous things—beauty and peace, the dark soul of the world—for I am the wife of the house, concerned for the rug, tidy and punctual, surrounded by blocks.

The Pelican Market

Early in the morning I was out scraping the frost from the windows of my car. The air was raw, a sharp wind blew up the hill, and the city below steamed and writhed and let fall back the big soft flakes of the soot of its breathing. When I settled myself behind the wheel I saw in the mirror that my face was smudged and so was one white wing of my collar. I cleaned myself as best I could but, still, it is not pleasant starting the day with a dirty shirt.

At 7:00 sharp I was in my territory. I parked in a deserted alley beside the paint flaked back of a frame house, pulled my samples case from the car, and started to work. At the first house someone's disheveled mother opened the door and I got in by sticking a penny packet of face powder in her hand and shoving a card at her and telling her to choose any article she wanted from the assortment shown, it was the company's gift to her; which was not exactly true because I have to buy the damn things.

I did not try to sell her anything. In the first place the trash we carry is not worth getting excited about and in the second, I do not care what anyone says, if these women do not want to buy, there is no power on earth can make them. I also find it goes just as well even though I stutter and let my voice die off before finishing a sentence.

This woman was like the rest, she had trouble following a line of thought. I showed her a jar of cold cream and told her it was made of hormones and let her rub a bit onto her hands. I made it sound as if the hormones were chopped up like peanuts and the paste poured into the jar. I told her it smelled nice and she agreed, it does not cost anything to agree. I told her the article was new and a very popular item. She knew what I meant because she had been through all this before with a hundred other salesmen and the words did not really mean anything. I did not smile, I did not act any way but indifferent because

that is the way I felt. I showed her everything in my case and paged through the samples book. I paged through it twice. She bought the cold cream and a box of moth crystals. I think she bought them because they were done up with gold colored labels. Then she bought a shake-on can of bath powder and three tooth brushes. I promised she would have everything by the end of the next week.

At the next three houses I had two more sales but I was not particularly happy about it; luck can change before you know how it happened, and in my book a good beginning usually means a bad ending. It turned out as I expected; for a while after that I could not get into a house even for a demonstration. Then I grew tired of punching door bells and looking at what those women's husbands seldom see so I stopped to watch a man climb a telephone pole.

"Don't fall," I told him, as he began stamping his spikes into the wood.

"I won't," he said, giving me a wink. "It hurts too much when you hit bottom."

He seemed genuinely friendly.

"It's those splinters you get when you slide," I told him.

He got the word from his foreman, standing a few feet away, and up he went, hitching his belt after him every few steps. Then a car pulled up and a fat man stuck his head out. "Hey, Harry!" he yelled to the man on the pole. "Got a match?"

"I don't smoke," said Harry, without looking down. "Ask Bill."

"I don't want a match from Bill!" shouted the fat man. "I want one from you!"

He and the foreman, Bill, roared with laughter. I tried to laugh too, but suddenly I felt as if I had been hit in the stomach with a baseball bat and I just stood there with no expression at all frozen on my face. But the others were not looking at me and, still yelping with laughter, the fat man drove off.

Then Bill called up to Harry: "That's better. Keep twisting it."

I looked up to see Harry pulling on the wires that led from one post to another, trying to separate them. For a moment that was all there was in the world, Harry up there jerking his arms, the wires snapping and whining, and the cold yellowish sky beyond. Then the spell broke and I went on to the next house.

The woman there had bought twice before from me but this time

she put up some resistance. I consider her a clinical case because she has an electric organ — we were standing beside it in her living room — even though she does not play a note nor has any intention of ever learning. I once asked her why she had bought it and she replied that it was something nice for the house. This time, after remaining undecided for a while, she persuaded herself to buy a bottle of synthetic cologne that smelled the way the backs of postage stamps taste, even though they put a perfumed oil in it strong enough to rot the shell of a turtle, and a pair of mop heads. It turned out her husband had been cheated on a car. He is a mechanic and should have known better than to be taken in like that. "Until we get over this," said the woman, who had an allergy and should not have been using anything on her skin, "we're cutting down expenses."

I agreed with everything she said, but I could have added a few things myself. My thumb was infected and throbbed every time I used it but my aches and pains did not interest anyone. My car was about ready for the scrap heap but I do not go around complaining about it, nor about anything else, for that matter ; such as the fact that the collector I had hired for five percent of what I sold had run away with last Saturday's receipts. He is a high school boy and there is no doubt at all the police will catch up with him soon, but of course he will not let himself be caught until he has spent the money. Everyone says it is a dirty shame, but I still have to pay the bill the company sent me.

I do not blame the boy ; he looked at the money and he looked at what it could buy, and away he went. I heard his girl friend had left town too. That means one more life is involved. I am not even sure I shall press charges. The boy's parents were over to see me. Despite the woman's crying fit and the assurances of the father, a sullen man with watery eyes, that he would whip the boy until the blood ran after the law had finished with him, and that their unnatural son would pay back every cent and a lot of other promises until I cut him off, I had the impression they somehow blamed me for what the boy has done. I am not completely certain they are wrong.

It sometimes happens that around the middle of the morning I become mixed up. What I mean is that after going into and leaving all these houses, and talking to women of all ages and sizes and degrees of ugliness, I sometimes do not know where I am nor which

way I am working the street. I enjoy this sensation of being lost. I try to prolong it as much as possible and always when I find my bearings I feel let down a little.

Still, I do not stand in the street too long. The Supervisor is always around to push us, and behind him is the Field Manager, who sometimes spot checks. Even the District Manager, a frog-like man with a hangdog face and purple lips, is not above snooping. In this business they are all afraid for their jobs. The Field Manager is the worst of the lot. He is young and thin, with a white hatchet face which never changes expression, and fine lips that hardly move when he talks. He is fond of light gray suits and dresses so carefully he hardly dares move.

Fred, the Supervisor, is not a bad sort though. He has a wife and a number of children and all he wants to do is make a living the best he can. But because he is in this way normal, he is on his way out. I know the symptoms. They are pushing him too hard.

Around noon he pulled up in his car and sitting beside him like a wooden Indian was the Field Manager. I had just left a house where I had picked up an order and went to the curb to see what they wanted.

"Well, Fred," I said. I felt sorry for him. He gave me a weak hello. He saves what enthusiasm he has for the customers, outside his professional approach he is completely colorless.

"How's it going?" he asked.

"Good," I told him. "Better than average." I peered through the window as if I had been taken by surprise. "Who's that with you?" I asked.

The Field Manager did not blink an eye. "You have any trouble covering your territory?" he barked.

"Not if I'm not held up gabbing," I told him. He gave me his best fish-eyed stare. Fred squirmed a little and gunned the motor. It is a mannerism of his, like a nervous cough; when he is not in his car he taps his foot.

"We're getting a good man to do your collecting," he said finally.

"He had better be good," I said. "Or I'll take time off and do it myself."

"Oh, there's no need to do that," said Fred, looking away down the street.

When they drove off the Field Manager did not even say goodbye. I remember once when he caught me on the sidewalk in one of my lost moods and asked me which way I was going. "Up," I told him with a crazy laugh. He probably thought I was after his job. He has not liked me since. As a matter of fact, he would fire me if he could find someone else, but that is not very likely, not many people can stay with a job like this.

I used to think a good salesman was like a wolf, that there was something predatory about us. But we are not wolves. We are jackals living off other people's kills. The managers are the worst of the lot; they stand in the background, yapping in a chorus, pushing us on and taking their percentage when we bring something down. They are a special kind of man, lazy, but with a great store of mechanical energy. Life holds no surprises for them; they know just how much they are getting and when.

Early in the afternoon I had just about run out of territory so I sat in the car for a while, smoking and watching the children coming home from school. My thumb was throbbing like crazy. It had swelled up again after I had knocked it against the sample case and stubbed it writing out orders. The weather was turning colder and a few big flakes of snow were sliding down from the sky, which reminded me that my shoes were worn and were letting water in. A group of children came out of a house nearby and began throwing a ball around the yard. One was a slender and pretty girl with her long dark hair done up in a pony tail. I could see that the world was a different thing for them, all right.

I finally went down to the corner and began working up that last street. When I reached the house where the children were playing they followed me to the door. The woman was pleasant enough but did not buy anything. In a way I was glad she did not. I passed out samples of toothpaste and lotion to the children and we began throwing the ball back and forth. One of them said: "Now Janey's got a boy friend." Janey was the one I had noticed before. She had shadows under her eyes and a serious questioning look on her face. I could see that her world was losing its simplicity. The children went with me a little way up the block, tumbling about like eager puppies after the ball, but Janey kept to the background. Then I threw the ball

down the street and they shouted and ran after it. It occurred to me that this was the high point of my day.

It was getting late. The wind had died and the snow was coming down more thickly. I started back over the route to pick off the calls I had missed earlier. At one address, where the woman had told me to come back later because her baby was sick, an ambulance was standing. It was all lit up with red lights, and vapor was trickling from the exhaust pipe. I went on to the next house where the whole family was standing on the porch. They told me the baby was three months old and ever since it was born it had trouble breathing ; sometimes it would stop altogether and then the mother would breathe in its mouth to get it started again.

They asked me what I was selling but I pretended not to hear them and continued on down the street. Before I turned the corner I looked back and saw the ambulance had gone.

I walked up and down the streets for a while, then stopped before a vacant lot filled with pine trees. The snow was now falling silently and heavily ; it was growing dark and from the windows of a few of the houses lights began to shine. I was alone and had the feeling that if I stood there long enough I would be buried under the soft snow, because it was not ever going to stop coming down. Again I had the sensation of being completely lost ; it was as if I had dropped from the sky to that spot and there was nothing but falling snow, and streets of silent houses row after row, and darkness settling over everything. The shame and disgust which had dogged me all day fell away and in spite of my aching thumb and wet feet and the cold and tiredness of my body I felt clean and refreshed and tried with all my might to retain that feeling of no direction.

I do not know how long I stood there trying to see beyond a world of kitchen doors and slatternly women and brutish faces and the smells of garbage and cooking grease. The whole world is a city, I told myself ; and the woods are beyond the city, and beyond the woods, who knows ? Then I became aware of the whorish smell of the bath talcum which had seeped out of my samples case and was clinging to my hands and clothes. I put the case down and fumbled with the catches but then stopped and picked it up once more and looked about me to see where I was.

The snow looked soiled. At first I thought it must appear that way because of the failing light, but then I noticed that it was falling mixed with soot. Not even the snow here comes down untouched, and that, it seemed to me, was the biggest joke of all.

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A Visit with William Carlos Williams

WILLIAM Carlos Williams has long been a champion of the American idiom as the source of the language and rhythm of modern verse. He speaks here in his own voice in a selection from conversations at his home in Rutherford, New Jersey. Although retired as a physician, Dr. Williams continues the practice of poetry. His latest poems have appeared in *Hudson Review*, *Poetry*, and other magazines, and a collection of his plays has recently been published by New Directions. On November 7, 1960, the Poetry Center in New York honored him with a special program given over to a reading of his major poem, *Paterson*.

Sutton, WCW

W.S. : One of the things you've mentioned often in writing about modern poetry has been the "variable foot."

W. C. W. : If you want to talk about the variable foot, which is very dear to my heart, I'll begin by saying something about free verse. But, to my mind, there is no such thing as free verse. It's a contradiction in terms. The verse is measured. No measure can be free. We may say Whitman's verse is a typical example of what is spoken of as free verse. Now he himself never called it free verse. It was a term originated I think in France by Paul Fort, who was an innovator, a poet who wrote in the manner of Whitman. And the variable foot is measured. But the spaces between the stresses, the rhythmical units, are variable. Whitman's verse could be counted as spaced, let us say, spaced long or short, but variable.

You mean that there are feet, even though the feet may not have regular stresses, as in conventional verse?

Very definitely, I do.

But you wouldn't think of them in terms of stresses?

No, not as stresses, but as spaces in between the various spaces of the verse. I would say perhaps the confusion comes from my calling them the feet.

Your mention of the spacing of the verses reminds me of Charles Olson and his discussion of projective or open verse. Do you think he is following the same line?

I do, definitely, and it all begins with Whitman, of course. Only Whitman's line is too long for the modern poet. At the present time I have been trying to approach a shorter line which I haven't quite been able to nail. I wanted the shorter line, the sparer line, and yet I want to give a measured line, but the divisions of the line should be shorter.

There seems to be a movement in this direction through the three-stepped lines in Paterson and the poems in Desert Music to the poems that have appeared more recently in the magazines.

Yes, for my next book, we'll say. Yes, more terse, and absolutely not the stretching out of the line that Whitman did.

Now you feel that this change represents an advance for you.

I very definitely do.

That this later work is superior to your earlier verse.

Yes, the shorter units.

Also, if we look at a book like Donald Allen's collection of The New American Poetry, it seems as though there is a whole younger generation of poets coming along, following the same path.

Yes, though I maintain that they don't know exactly, metrically, what they're doing, most of them. They have a tendency to call it free verse, but I object.

The long line, which you feel is out of joint with the times, you find in Ginsberg and some of the other Beat poets. Do you see a tendency toward more compression in some of the other younger poets?

Yes, though I've not succeeded in getting them to adopt the term the variable foot. They say what the hell is that, the variable foot?

Whether they call it the variable foot or not, many of them seem to be trying to work with verses in the same way. You have mentioned Denise Levertov, and she is very close to you in her way of writing. Oh yes, very close. . . . She is from England. But she came to this country to seek a freer relationship to the line in our country, and she has adapted herself completely to our way of listening. She is a very

interesting person to me. And she is a very skillful poet. She is half Welsh and half Jewish. That's a curious thing and must have its influence on the writing of her poetry. But she has rebelled from England and come to a freer place. Free construction of the line and has done very well at it.

She is often named with the Beats, isn't she?

Yes, she was in San Francisco. She's in New York now. And she is definitely classed among the modern American poets. Classed as what we'll call a Beat, we'll say. Too bad to know them as Beats. But the Beats haven't contributed anything much. I encountered the work of Kerouac. I was tremendously disappointed. Awful. It's a prose work. But for God's sake, what he is attempting to do, I just don't know. Well, I think Denise has a sense of metrical arrangement of lines which is not the conventional thing, but it has a unity. . . . I feel closer to her than to any of the modern poets. She is more alert — very much more alert to my feeling about words — As Flossie says, she is America's woman poet of the future.

Most of the younger poets in Allen's collection acknowledge the influence of both you and Pound.

Gee, Pound is — I've written a letter to Pound saying that he is the first who has used in his writing as a poet the American idiom. But he has not answered me. Doesn't dare, I think.

You probably insulted him.

Yes, I think so. I hope so. But it came as a flash of insight into his poetry. Into the poems he has written, which are never regular, never strictly measured. . . .

But the younger poets, including Olson, seem very much aware of what you and Pound have done. Wouldn't you say that Olson's poem on Gloucester is close to your work, as well as to Pound's?

Oh yes, Flossie has read the whole of Olson's Maximus poems to me. The earlier Maximus poem has been very much modified in the final printing and is not the same poem at all. I don't know whether I like it as much as I did, but it is very much more closely identified with Gloucester, the sea people, and the sailors. . . . He must have shifted in his own mind what he was going to say. He must have realized that it was a sea poem. Very definitely more so than he first intended. . . . And how he wrote the poem down on the page was very interesting to me. And the shorter lines. Anti-Whitman. It's a good ex-

ample of what has happened to Whitman. Olson's line is very much more in the American idiom. A shorter division of the lines, not the tendency of Ginsberg. He went back. His longer lines don't seem to fit in with the modern tendency at all. Retrograde. I didn't like them at all in *Howl!* If he had paid attention to what Olson was doing it would have been more successful. . . . Olson does identify himself with Gloucester and the sailors, and it might have been a better poem if it had been more so. Maybe not calling it Maximus, but calling it Gloucester. It would be more understandable. But he wants to call it Maximus. And what is the definition of Maximus? I'd like to hear him talk about that. What does he mean by Maximus? Maximus means the furthest development of something.

I suppose this could be the extension of personality. To encompass the world. As in Whitman's idea of embracing, of speaking for more than himself—

I'd like to hear him talk about it. What Maximum has to do with Gloucester. Gloucester is a very circumscribed image. But it is an attractive image to me. Very. It is an American image, developed in America, in an environment with which he was familiar as a child. And it developed his conception of his childhood. Maybe a maximum conception. That would make it much more important to me. And he is not English in any sense, but writes in the American idiom developed to the maximum proportions. . . .

You have mentioned Whitman several times. Wasn't he one of your early favorites?

Whitman was the first American poet that I was interested in. I was reading him in 1903 when I first went to Penn. My wife had presented me with the *Leaves of Grass* before we were married, and I took that book with me, and I absorbed it with enthusiasm. I loved to read the poems to myself. I don't know why I had that instinctive drive to get in touch with Whitman, but he was a passionate man, and the first great poem, "The Song of Myself," was more or less an adolescent poem, I think, because it was throwing away any hold the classics had on him. He didn't know where to go, perhaps, but he didn't know anything about the English language as taught in England, and he wanted to be himself, and he couldn't contain himself any longer. So he just lept off, and he was driven to find a way for himself, like the American pioneers, we'll say. He had to go. He didn't know where

to go, and he wrote the way he felt. And it was not studied because he didn't know how to study it.

Do you think that his desire to provide a scripture of some kind might have been the reason for his shifting to something closer to a biblical form than to the form of conventional English verse?

I don't hear any biblical form in his poems.

I was thinking of his using parallelism to form verses rather than following the conventional way.

It may have been the Bible that started him off, but he persisted in going astray, and he would not be disciplined. Aside from the discipline of his own voice. He must have said them aloud. I never thought of that. But he must have recited what he had to say aloud. To neighbors, we'll say, and friends. I don't know whether it's recorded that he did recite or not. . . .

You have also said that you think of Pound as standing at the beginning of modern American verse. How do you see his contribution as being different from that of Whitman?

But Pound was *disciplined*. He was a scholar, no matter how faulty a scholar. He was following the scholarship of Europe. And the songs of Europe. The Provençal. He was a student of English and Provençal and French, and, to a certain extent, Spanish. But he didn't acknowledge Whitman as a master.

He does have a poem that says that he had had a quarrel with Whitman but that it's time to make up. You broke the wood, he said, and it's time for us to do the carving.

Yes, it is a poem that was inspired by Whitman's example. But both Eliot and Pound rejected Whitman as a master. He didn't have anything to teach them. But they didn't *know* what he had to teach them. The idiom itself, which they did not acknowledge.

Although Pound sometimes uses an exaggerated American dialect. He tends to clown it as Lowell does, in a Yankee farm accent, but he doesn't do it well. He clowns it so obviously that — It's kind of hayseed accent, which is entirely in his own mind. No one would ever talk that way.

Is this the voice you hear in the letters often?

Why, I think so. . . . He thinks he's smart, and he's not smart. He's inaccurate. He attempts to make fun of all American speakers, but he doesn't know what he's talking about.

This is the role he puts himself into as Old Ez —
Agh, Old Ez. A pain in the ass.

Does he talk that way too ?
Yes, he does, once in a while. I think it was personally directed toward making fun of me, as an American.

Trying to talk to you in your own language —
Why yes, that's the thing, more or less, and it didn't go over with me. He doesn't know how I talk or how an American talks. The way an American talks is unimportant to him, so that he's liberated to make fun of it. But there's something else which he doesn't know. . . . I've been insisting that since the day of Pound a cultured American language, which was different from England, which was not recognized by Pound, has grown up. And that particularly in our poetry made an idiom of its own in the early years of the twentieth century. It had not been recognized as a poetic language at all, and all our generation was rejected, because we didn't speak *English*, the English of the schools. But we were — I was talking a language I was familiar with, that I got from — Polish people, we'll say, any man that would talk to me at all. Pound would want to take it to Harvard, or some such place.

You think that there is a native cultured language, which is cosmopolitan, as well as the foreign cultured languages that Pound was interested in ?

Yes, and Pound has not been completely frank with me. He wants me to be known as a more or less uneducated man. And I — as far as I'm concerned — I knew a damn sight more French than he did. I was not completely read in English or American literature, but I was gradually setting up another fund of knowledge of poems. . . .

As for Eliot, I think that at one time, or more than one time, you referred to The Waste Land as a kind of disaster for modern verse.
Yes, I read it with a great deal of interest. And Pound had read it before it was published as Eliot's work. The secret of Pound's admiration for this poem of Eliot's, which Pound had worked on — It impressed him. Here was a cultured man, much as he was. And the only difference between Pound and Eliot was that Pound wasn't impressed in the same way. He didn't want to be English. And Eliot wanted to. Something happened in his soul, we'll say (I don't want to use the word *soul*), but something happened to his Christian soul

that convinced Eliot that he was going wrong. And therefore he had to correct himself. In a very well-known appearance at Columbia University he acknowledged the whole thing. He adopted the Church of England and all the Christian dogmas of his church. . . . And he followed Milton. And I was particularly offended because in my reading of Milton, I found him to be using inversions of phrase which offended me, because I couldn't speak my own language without using, freely, inversions, which Shakespeare also does. But I wanted to get rid of using inversions of phrase—Latinizations—and so, taking a backdoor approach, I was forced to consider a variation of the phrase in the manner of Whitman. If I'm going to use my language, my own language, I had to have the dignity, the effrontery, to follow a new pattern. But Eliot wouldn't do that. He would give up his language and go to a type of religious experience that would permit him to talk in a British manner, even if it had to be known that it was also the manner of Shakespeare. But to talk in the American idiom you can't talk as Shakespeare used to talk, or Milton, or Eliot. You have finally to get away from this pattern of speech and invent another speech . . . to be formed, to be patterned after a new mode. I've got myself in wrong before the critics by attempting to bring in the idea of mathematics. Of Einstein. Not Einstein, we'll say, but Einstein's ideas. The uncertainty of space.

Or of time, as something that can no longer be measured in the same way. You have suggested that this is something that affects a poet regardless of whether he is familiar with the theory in a technical way. That he is simply living in a world that is somehow different— Yes, a very different world. And maybe it's impossible to write poetry conventionally. I think it is. But there is another way of doing it, and this—without knowing it—Whitman stumbled on. . . . But there is the practical problem of the writing of a modern poem, an American poem, on the page, which anyone who faces it has to acknowledge as very complicated, and very difficult. And it begins in the adoption of the American idiom. If you write poems in that way you have to do certain things with the poem. To make it good. To make it subtle. To make it responsive to strange pressures. And many poets don't do it, and most of them write very tiresome verses, metrically.

Could you say something about these things that happen to the language. Or is this untranslatable?

It's untranslatable but it's not English. . . .

When you said something about the way the poem goes down on the page, I was reminded of a Cummings poem.

Yes, Cummings has very much to say, and he speaks in the American idiom. I think that if Cummings was asked to write a typically British poem governed by the English academy, he would have great difficulty. But not entirely, because after all Cummings is an English scholar —

And he loves the sonnet.

Yes, he does love the sonnet. But he is very conventional when he writes his little lyrics in *da ding da ding da ding da ding*. He is not convincing to me. He's not subtle at all.

Do you think there is a difference in quality between his conventionally-rimed poems and his relatively free poems?

These relatively free poems are when he does his best work. He stretches a bit. To make something come into the pattern. But he has never named the thing that he does, which I have attempted to name. And maybe come a cropper. When Cummings does a conventional poem, he speaks a really vulgar language, anything he wants to say, but he's not satisfactory. Sometimes he's just prosy. . . .

Keats he liked especially, who was also one of your favorites —

Oh, yes, my first poet that I recognized was Keats. I didn't know anything at all about language, and I was a medical student, but I got great emotional satisfaction from hearing Keats read — *Hyperion*, I believe.

Was it the sensuousness?

I don't know what it was. I was writing a long poem. Wasn't counting at all, just putting it down, presumably blank verse. I thought I was writing blank verse, but thank God it's all been destroyed. It was a very romantic poem. I was writing that when I was an intern at French Hospital in New York, and I was to write this long poem which was terrifically romantic. God knows where that came from.

This was before you made the break from conventional verse.

Yes, before I even knew Pound. I had to do something. I was determined that it would be a poem. I didn't know what a poem should be — what it should be like.

But you were finding out —

I was finding out, more or less. But, well, from that time I went along

with Pound. Later on, he switched to Eliot and his *Waste Land*, which I admired too, but I was intensely jealous of this man, who was much more cultured than I was, and I didn't know anything about English literature at all. But when I recognized what he was doing I didn't like it at all. He was giving up America. And maybe my attachment to my father, who was English and who had never become an American citizen influenced me because I was — You know, the Oedipus complex, between father and son — I resented him being English and not being American. And that was when Eliot was living in England and had given up America.

I see that you have been reading Shapiro's In Defense of Ignorance. What do you think of his describing Pound and Eliot as intellectuals and culture poets, while you are seen differently, as a kind of primitive —

Not primitive. Inventive. But I find something in the body of the poetry which is very difficult to approach. Very difficult to make a construction that will be new. I think occasionally I get a tremendous thrill when I have written something. I say *Jesus*, that's *new*! That's nothing that anyone else is doing, and I have great difficulty to pull off a little patch of life in the language I know, which is the American idiom, which the English can't duplicate, because they're not inventing any more. All has been done for them. But they can repeat a language. A beautiful language. But not invent in it. The construction can't be invented by them. And in my language I can find some release with a hard effort, which is invention, hard effort when I want to say something, to speak in some way, to construct a poem that will not be a sonnet and not be a quatrain at all but very sensuous and that wanders over the page in a very curious way that has never before been encountered. The poem is here but the metric is here, and they go along side by side — the verbal invention and the purely metrical invention — go along arm in arm, looking for a place that they can embrace, we'll say, and then they go together. Why, they strike it off. And that's a *poem*! That's very seldom found, and we have the same thing in any poet.

The marriage of language and metric?

Yes, and you can fight and fight and fight a lifetime till you hit a fusion.

And you feel this is easier to do in the American idiom than in British English?

Yes, the English are not inventive any more. English men and Englishwomen are not dead, we'll say, but —

Poetically dead, you'd say?

I think they are poetically dead.

Did you also mean that the English poets may be imitating themselves, or their past?

Yes, I think they are.

Do you see any departures from this at all?

They try their best, but they just go over and over and over.

It is rare for an English poet to break away from regular meters.

Well, what can they do? They're cultured gentlemen, and we know what that thing means. They're goddam liars.

You don't think that poetry is compatible with the cult of the gentleman?

No, the cult of the gentleman will lead him to double-cross a man. The really cultured gentleman will do you dirt if he can get away with it, and not be found out.

Of course, there are some of the younger English writers who are reacting against the old order, or the Establishment, as they call it, men who are in a way really anti-gentlemanly. This may be more apparent in the prose than in the poetry. Do you notice any evidence of this attitude in the poetry?

No, I haven't. Though there is a young English poet I have not met, who has not been outside of England. Out of Cambridge, we'll say. Who is translating Catullus. It is supposed to be one of the best, the most undisciplined bawdy translations. He has been rejected by the British scholars at the present moment. And I'm going to hear more about him. He is the most delightful translator of Catullus.

Have you seen some of it in manuscript, or has some of it been published?

I have some here. A few of the poems were published in *Agenda* [London]. Peter Whigham is his name. Well, he's writing now, and he's trying to get a publisher. He's working on it. He's young. It'll be a wonderful thing, to have Flossie read it to me. . . .

Another thing I wanted to ask you about is the status of the poet. When Pound first went abroad, there was a sense of the alienation of the poet. He wrote poems about the artist being cast away in the American village, lost in a Philistine culture. And in some of

your poems you wrote about the fact that your townspeople were not aware that there was a poet living among them who might be important to them, even though he wasn't recognized. What kind of change in the status of the poet do you see over the past fifty years?

Oh, very much improved. Partly by the women, we'll say, by the attempt of the women to recognize poetry and art of all kinds. It has made the men conscious that they are missing something. When I first attempted to read poetry thirty-five or forty years ago, at church functions, or club functions, they always wanted to hear me say something shocking. Now, I wanted to shock them by reading some of the shocking poems I had attempted to write—and I did write—and they would burst into raucous cheers when I would say anything shocking, and that was being a poet, to be careless of what other people say. And that was taken up by the Beatniks. They attempt to show they don't care about the conventions by using vulgar words and cursing—They want to appear tough.

But this battle is largely in the past, except for the Beatniks?

Yes, the reception of poetry by the general public is very much better than it used to be. It used to be that when I attempted to read poetry they could not understand what I was taking about in the first place. And any man who dealt with poetry must be effeminate. And therefore he must compensate. But that's entirely in the past. I'm accepted by the ordinary people I know, my friends, in my town. They have come to accept me.

You feel that there is a respect that had been lacking?

Yes, a very great respect. I'm accepted, and admired, and envied, to a certain extent. As I've gotten older, I've been more accepted by the general public. I've been praised, more than I want to be. They don't understand what the hell I'm driving at, but they accept me.

And beyond the community the modern poet has an increasingly wide reading audience. The fact that colleges include modern poetry in their curriculums has helped.

Even high schools. I've been asked to read, and I've been appreciated. I've had many letters from high school kids, both male and female. . . .

The attitude of society toward the poet has changed. What about the poet's attitude toward society? You once wrote an essay called

"Against the Weather," the idea being that the artist or poet has to be in resistance to the currents of his time. Is that still your opinion?

Yes, it's still my opinion. Definitely.

In Paterson there is a criticism of the society expressed. And some of the ideas in the poem suggest a sympathy with the ideas of Pound even though you may not agree with him politically.

Yes, though I don't know specifically what you're aiming at.

I was thinking of the section on money, for example.

Oh, yes, I was very sympathetic with Pound, in this way. For my father was always interested in socialism. And he used to have books around the house, which I didn't bother to read very much, but he was really a socialist to a certain extent. He would have been a socialist if he had lived in England at this time. And I always had a sympathetic feeling toward socialism, and when Pound began to talk about it, he interested me in Major Douglas. I tried to read up on Major Douglas's work. . . .

Pound went back into the bank war in the Cantos —

Oh, yes, I'm out of sympathy with all our capitalists to this day. Money is the death of America. And it's coming out more and more in our present difficulties with Russia.

Do you think that this is something that a poet is usually sensitive to?

I think so. He can't be a poet without knowing about interest and money. It's not human to ignore the people.

You made some reference to socialized medicine. I gather that this is something you were in favor of as a physician.

Yes, I've always been fighting with the organization of the doctors. And organized medicine. They are the type of men as doctors which I particularly despise. Doctors who practice medicine for money and not for humanity. I know too many men who have just wanted to keep the price of medicine up so that they get their divvy. My idea of the old doctor is not the money-grabbing type, who has to make money to get on. It's not sympathetic to me.

The fourth book of Paterson suggests also that both as a doctor and as a poet you were thinking of the word cancer in both a medical and an economic sense.

Well, money is a cancer.

Of course, in Pound, the usura theme is strong all through the Cantos. Do you think this is a point of contact between your work and his?

I was very conscious of it, all during those years, and I identified myself with him as far as I was able to, to assist him. But he had some crazy ideas, which made me laugh. He always had to pretend to know more about medicine than I did. . . .

Many of your poems have references to painting.

Yes, because of my interest in painting, the Imagists appealed to me. It was an image that I was seeking, and when Pound came along with his drive for the image it appealed to me very strongly. Poetry and the image were linked in my mind. And it was very natural for me to speak of poetry as an image and to write down a poem as an image and to leave it to the natural intelligence of a man. . . . If an image were set down on canvas, it was both a poem and a picture at the same time, and it was a very fertile thing to me to deal with. . . . When I found Pound talking of the image I accepted it as a poem. . . . I've always admired painters; my best friends have been painters. Charles Demuth is one of my earliest friends, and when I went to Philadelphia to study medicine, I ate in the same boarding house that he did. . . . The image of a painting identified the man as a poet to me.

And you never found it difficult to communicate with painters?

Somehow you feel that you and they speak the same language?

Yes, very close. . . . And as I've grown older, I've attempted to fuse the poetry and painting to make it the same thing —

Is one of the things you do to abstract the elements of the work or the images from the work, or whatever the forms may be, in a way that indicates what seems to you to be somehow the essential principle of design involved?

Very definitely, very well stated. The design of the painting and of the poem I've attempted to fuse. To make it the same thing. And sometimes when I write I don't want to say anything. I just want to present it. Not a didactic meaning. I don't care about the didactic meaning — the moral. To add some tag is absolutely repulsive to me.

You're interested in it as an abstract work regardless of whether it's representational or not?

Yes, I don't care whether it's representational or not. But to give a

design. A design in the poem and a design in the picture should make them more or less the same thing.

Is painting closer to you than music?

Yes, to me it's closer than music. Music doesn't mean much to me. I like old-fashioned music, I think, but I'm not very sympathetic to this modern atonality. Painting is much more my meat. Maybe, we'll say, the Renaissance, the big murals at the Vatican—they make much more sense to me. Also, I was tremendously involved in an appreciation of Cezanne. He was a designer. He put it down on the canvas so that there would be a meaning without saying anything at all. Just the relation of the parts to themselves. In considering a poem, I don't care whether it's finished or not; if it's put down with a good relation to the parts, it becomes a poem. And the meaning of the poem can be grasped by attention to the design.

One of the artists you mention in Paterson Five is Toulouse-Lautrec. Is he interesting to you because he is the artist of the whorehouse, as you call him, or because of the nature of his work?

Well, I was attracted to Toulouse-Lautrec by his social position, which I sympathized with. A whore is just as much a human being as a saint, and I wanted to emphasize that. He is a man that respected the truth of the design. For God's sake, what the hell difference is it to him that she's a whore? He was indifferent to it, and the poet is also indifferent to it. . . .

There is a kind of identification here of the painter with the outcast, which is, I suppose, partly a rebellion, or a gesture.

It is very definitely a gesture. Villon was a reprobate, but he was a truth-speaker. Truth in the sense of the artist. And the artist can't bother about what people are thinking.

Do you think that part of the appeal of the prostitute as a subject is that the prostitute doesn't have to be conventional in the way that a lady is?

Yes, she's a professional figure as a model. All artists are moved by real human relations and not artificial, which all the rest of us need to respect. If the ordinary people have to be divided by social relationships, the artist has to get away from that to real human truth.

By breaking through restricting conventions?

Yeah, well—children don't respect social distinctions if they have any chance to determine their own position in the world, until they

have been perverted by their elders and forced into certain categories, for instance, Catholic, Protestant. Ph-h-h, for God's sake, what is that to an artist? It's worse than idle to think about. Villon was a Catholic, and he respected the forms because he was damn well made to do it. . . .

You said you don't like much modern music. What is your feeling about jazz, and the attention that the Beat poets have given it?
The Beat generation has nothing to do with beat, and they should if they're interested in jazz because jazz is always percussive. But in jazz music even the saxophone sounds are not advanced enough from the primitive to interest me at all. I don't like jazz. The artists in Paris rave about jazz, but it's too tiresome, it's too much the same thing.

There's not enough variability?
Not variability at all. Not subtle. And if you've got to be sexually excited by it, it shows you to be a boob. It merely excites; there's no subtlety at all. . . .

From what you have said about jazz, and other things as well, it seems that the critics who have tried to classify you as a primitive may be off the beam.
I think so. I was very sexually successful, as a young man, but I did not believe in going so far that I lost my head. I wanted always to be conscious. I didn't want to indulge in sex so much that I lost my head.

This may be a distinction to make between you and the Beats, since I think that in Beat poetry there is often the desire to get beyond consciousness somehow

Yes, I think so very definitely.

through jazz or sex or dope, or whatever it may be.
Dope! That I have no sympathy for at all! I want to be always deeper intellectually — That's a bad term to use — *intellectually* — because it makes you think of the thinker, but I don't think that the thinker's thinking anything out any more than Kant thought out in his *Critique of Pure Reason*. What did he think he was coming to? Except futility. And I don't believe in the Beat. I've known some of the Beat poets. But they only confuse themselves. That is, an anti-Beat tenet of mine would be the variable foot. But what do they know about the variable foot? They've never thought anything about it. They don't even know that poetry is written in measurable feet.

Is that one reason why this poetry can be read with jazz? Because

it doesn't have a beat of its own anyway, would you say?

That is a very good thought. I think it is because they want to be primitive. And they *want* to be primitive.

Self-consciously.

Yes, self-consciously. And they can't be primitive. The only thing they can be is more thoughtful than ever. . . . I've known many primitive people, but they are surprisingly complex when you get to know them. Their primitive natures disappear. They become quiet. We value them as individuals not because of their beat characteristics but because they are capable of becoming more like us.

As for the Beats, you have been associated with a number of them, as you have with younger poets generally, and I think that at least in the beginning of the movement there might have been the idea that you were —

One of them? And then that's where we parted company. I can't believe you can excite yourself, brainlessly, into being a member of the Beat generation. I think that a poet should be understanding.

You don't feel then that to any extent you have been a father of the Beat generation?

No. No. It has been accidental that I knew Allen Ginsberg. My only association with him was that he had something to say and I wanted him to say it. And I wanted to befriend him. But I am not thoroughly satisfied with what he has done. I have told him — I mean I am disgusted with him and his long lines.

Don't you think that this movement seems to be receding anyway, by now?

Receding because of their inability to make themselves think. And they tend toward homosexuality. For God's sake, what's homosexuality? A variant of sexuality. The same thing. There's nothing new about that. It's been done before. And no *enlightenment*

A Long Man in my Limbs

ANOTHER sad morning, though the news is good.
Wakefulness wearies me, humankind is mad.
The sun shrugs in grey cloud.
Rain sweeps back from abroad.

I am a swimmer, suddenly seized with cramp,
Fighting the dissolution of green, the pump
Revving up in my lungs
To move these deadweight legs,

But sinking, sinking, and water the world's tears,
And no infallible diver, and the weirs
Trembling with temptation
End all indecision.

And churning, churning, they turn and toss me there,
Like a gross salmon flailing elastic air,
And drown me, turbulent,
Out of my element,

To drift now to deep water where pleasure-boats
Skim gaily over me, tangled in tree-roots,
Sunk without trace beneath
Eroded slabs of earth.

And now wake up, creep away, up through the stream,
Stand without dizziness, look about, reclaim
The sun crunching white cloud,
The rain swept off abroad.

But as I shake myself, cold still to the bone,
Assuming a jauntiness men think is mine,
A long man in my limbs
Sets off the brain's alarms,

Not waking, not walking jaunty, lying still,
Deep in the dregs of a fox's drinking-hole,
Where only roots and stones
Jostle among his bones.

O Where You Go

Islands are hardening from the sea
Where dawn uncoils the horizon
Making it fast for another day.
And sailors are still, watching
The phosphorus fade like stars.

And I would be with them
Drawing the new day across my eyes:
And afterwards to lie listening
As the ship stirs to stewards:
And then a tap to set your eyelids
Trembling on wakefulness.

But where you go you go from me
And I lie inland
Hearing only the wind stirring the trees
And birds loud about their toilet,
And the whistle of cowmen as lowing
Breaks plaintive all across the morning,
As the one thought breaks across my dream

O where you go you go from me
You go from me.

The Orphanage, Asolo

Check uniforms of white and blue
March in a playground Browning knew,
And Shelley wrote among the hills
Across the harvest of the plain
Of innocence and adult ills
And died before he came again.

And now this sun, this summer air,
The infant squadrons wheeling there,
Are shadowed by an English name;
And I, intruder in the town,
Turn from the innocents's loud game,
Fearful how many have to drown.

Slaughter A Fatted Calf

MY CALF staggered backward on stiff legs ;
Then, when the club came down a second time,
She fell, and silence fell. A lean blade grazed
And opened her throat wide. Her blood, amazed
By grass, searched for veins in a hectic stream,
Squandered its vivid color down to the dregs.

As her body straightened up, dead weight creaked
Through rope and straining bough, and threw a scare
Into cloudy sheep browsing under the orchard.
What could a butcher's hands bring forth to scorch
Our eyes from the crypt he opened, sure
As a priest at mass ? It was her warm life leaked

So quietly, anointing the facile gestures
That lifted vitals out of a broken cave.
Hidden seams in the hide gave way as the neat
Knifework stripped the rind from dripping meat,
Laid bare to our sight all that comes alive
When grass is nibbled gently in wide pastures.

Oh I know that beauty can only be skin deep,
That when I curried her coat and curls it was only
To pleasure myself, to touch what I could not be.
Though my blind hand stroked with love, no hand could free
The great thing that was beast in her, lonely,
But innocent of it as children are in sleep.

Yet I was not innocent of it, and this was not sleep.
When the parcelled veal was packed away to freeze,
I knelt, alone, and spread out the scrolled hide.
It was soft, white, and threaded with veins inside
Like a map charting the rivers that run through trees,
That natural flow which only a sudden leap

In the heart can grasp. My dreams wore a thin disguise:
Moonlight poured on vellum snowbanks traced
Woodcuts of aspen and elm; Inklings the flare
Of a match corrupted, Texture my hungers tore.
Next morning I planted the skin where an oak's thirst
Would sip her essence clear of the eggs of flies.

Kano painting
on a Japanese screen

OCTOBER is at ease when the tree
has shed its summer cloth. A crow,
seen in interlude, perches its gain
on a thin dark branch above the debris

of fallen multiplicities. There
is pattern, too, in this leafless
silhouette, for the vein's lone hand
clenches precision by a spare

arrangement in the eye. We cling
to reality first by negation, touching
the corners of things; then effortless
are the damask burdens of spring.

Blue Tables

You are young. You will not see
The spermwhite moon that flounders on the morning sky,
The bonewhite moon that's dying on the blue sand of the beach.

You will ignore the skeletons of love
That wash from nocturnal arms on the blue, dispirited shore,
That wash from backrooms of paradise into the secular light.

You will not hear the tangled wrath-song of the birds
Pinned to the truth of dessicated trees,
Pinned as the fish are pinned to the web of the ocean floor.

You will not observe proud funerals
Parading across the water with priapean gods
To celebrate their love-waste in the seashells of mourning.

But we, whose fading fingers make sad music, will ascend,
Weeping from the pillow of blue bones, washing our loins
In the cold wind, stumbling among debris of ancient burnings

To scavenge for bits of applecore birds will not eat from the sand ;
To scavenge for alabaster droppings from that godly feast
We ate in ancient dreams, beneath white moons, upon blue tables.

Listen, Friend

for F. E.

So we've all had troubles too ;
this can now mean nothing to you.
You and I're closer yet farther than ever :
each walks streets as alone
as each has made them. Still

our talk's easy : no planned
revelations profane the beer's
simple ritual, and if omitted
admissions linger kindly on,
the aftertaste is fresh as a first

cigarette. What more can either
say when both know there's
nothing to say ? Men don't
sit and stare, don't weep, these days :
friend, you're a goddamned

anachronism. Sure, sit till you
can sit no longer—no,
I'll not offer you pain
or advice. The choice is there :
the street to walk, the chair to sit.

Neither matters, maybe. The long run's
shorter than I'd care to say.
No choice—your hell's finally yours :
afoot, at table, or in bed,
I bury only the dead.

Pink Gown

When it lay rumpled, still
swarming with your nakedness,
I remember telling myself I'd
remember less than real images,
real phrases, to set Augustan
sunlight flowing round you
as you stood stretching August
to its own warm shape.

Well done,
I thought, smirking to the roots ;
remember half the soft
urgency of the gown's touching
six favored places. Light, light—
spun foam woven, it graces
one immediate moment.

No hurry :
a citizen of this thin air
might say I sit and stare
too long. I remember neither
more nor less : each twist
and fold holds, stays, and grows
in a lucent instance.

Swan Lake

(Chapultepec Park, Spring, 1954.)

YEARS ago I came upon a lake
wherein my cousin lay
floating, her wild breasts
moons under the water, an eagle mounting her, while
—swarming from the west—
the black Huastecas all, alas, flew down.

Within the wingpit of a single swan
the vision's pressed,
till—covert, as for an itch—she pulls
her floss, and swims away
at once, the passion lost,
her grace the dense imposture of that neck.

So all emotion drowns in what we say:
Odette, the swan, dies;
Dame Margot sometimes despairs
of America; one dreams as a last resort.
Yet, in my grizzled hair
that little crown, more like a ring, sits down.

I halt no Europe in my half-hour prime.
No fountains wobble here;
no plump, gregarious spirits hasten out,
fretting the commons. Where
do they fly? Where would they fly:
there is no south to equal paradise.

And now it is winter, consanguineous bird.
I lift these arms and rave,
they are so spare; I say, "Entreat me not
to leave you," meaning, "Stay!"—
more than I can believe
in. Distractable, and lame, best to forsake

April, the sorrow at Chapultepec,
bicycles, those poor at play.
Yet oftener, since, I've moved
following feathers, my human wisdom hot,
but, darker than the dark love
where that one cygnet lay, unborn: my heart.

White Rose

I

IT WAS a rose, a single rose
kept behind glass,
a long-stemmed rose ready for bloom,
unaware as yet
how far-reaching a stab
a rose can assume
in that dew-drenched cave
within each man
where memories gather
and fragments of songs
break forth from sleeping ranks
at the sight of a rose,
a presence none can grasp
in all its form and core.
It was a rose this winter evening,
a rose at a late hour
behind the window of a flower store.

II

The whiteness of the world at that late hour,
of the snow drifting past windows and lampposts;
the aloofness of the statue in the square,
stone head and shoulder alive with
the whiteness that enshrined them:
these could in no way compare with
the whiteness of the rose,
the modest color of the unassuming creature.

III

It was this spectacle of purity
behind the florist's glass, and drift of snow:
the concentrated whiteness of
a winter rose that stabbed me so.
And made me think of times
when young and shy but old enough
to be torn by a hint, I heard a song
and saw a trembling ballet dancer turn
into her part. Or when, as a child
I stared at the whiteness of a water bird
whose fluttering wings and desperate cry
aflame and white behind the tresses of a willow tree,
made up the first and unexpected splash of cruelty.

Clambake

Nor was it the moon,
appointed, pure in outline,
huge among stars, painted;
nor was it the wind.

Chinese firecrackers,
Chinese lanterns; O the flare
and the pop! Acres of
summer went well with

the fields of light made
by the moon tugging at tides.
And the gale mewled offshore.
You could hear the hiss

of rockets. The hiss of
the flames on the beach. The
surf's hiss too, the kiss of
sand. It was not the

moon. Nor was it the
old wind offshore, moaning.
It was partly these, partly
their white permanence

and cold. But it was
the pop too, the flare, the
flash of flame. Short. Slight. Red and
unappointed. The

scrim of those quick, quaint
with life. The scream of bright
rockets; night's backdrop; summer's
curtain. Clams in a

bucket. Fire them, shell
them in the summer dark.
A heap of shells on the shore
looks like the moon's shards.

Millpond

This is the place where peace grows
like a green frond set among waters aerial
with dragonflies. Where, at noon,
the trees section the broad falling
leaf of light, and space color upon the millpond,
yet do not move because motion
might be lost upon silence.

This is the place where a stone,
given its occasional career, could disturb
little with an arc and fall,
for the pond would swallow all voice
and shoulder brief ripples into its banks until
moss had absorbed this small wet gift,
showing a fancy darker.

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This is the place where one may
abet his heart's romance, deceiving his eyes by
unconsciously confusing
slow change with no change. But even
here, dream makes way for declensions of wind and sun.
The alders will grow, moss will dry.
Wings will pulsate, then plummet.

This is the place where peace rests
like ferns beyond lilies. The trick is to wear it
as a mantle, but to know
cloaks for cloaks, shelters for shelters.
Beneath this recovery of surfaces, fish wait
for the dragonfly's mistake. The
trick is to lose, but to own.

Matthew Josephson

Jean Hélion: The Return from Abstract Art

THAT ART objects of every sort should have enjoyed a boom in this postwar era is one of the pleasanter side-effects of inflation. Fore-handed people have been eagerly exchanging a depreciating money for moveables having scarcity value, whether in the form of a Van Gogh or a Biedermeier armchair. But what has been unexpected is the booming quotations for avant-garde artworks of the abstract expressionist type, now being produced in mass quantities in the United States, and by artists only recently arrived in our midst. Half the art dealers in New York, it is said, handle such works exclusively and cry for more; for they have come into high fashion as wall decorations for modern sitting-rooms or for the vestibules of plate-glass skyscrapers.

"The sky is changed—and what a change!" we might exclaim, in the manner of Byron, as we consider the busy art scene of New York. Our art public, formerly small and aesthetically timid, has grown large and bold in its appetite for "action-paintings" of the non-figurative type, composed usually of pure color masses, hermetic "signs," or collages, or mechanical fantasies. The group of American Abstract Artists, organized a few years before World War II, was much ridiculed formerly; today it is a conquering army.

Is this post war movement in American art which has aroused so much curiosity and excitement a manifestation of moral reaction, like that of the so-called Beat Generation in the literary field? The new breed of abstract artists do seem to constitute a distinctive American School that differs from earlier movements of Cubist or non-objective art pioneered in Europe. Like Mr. Jack Kerouac and his compeers they claim to be up in arms against "outworn myths and old rules"—according to Clifford Still. Now they hammer out

"geometrical vibrations" compulsively or automatically; or now, with Robert Motherwell, they go "voyaging into the night, one knows not where, on an unknown vessel," driven by their unconscious reflexes that project them into the formless. The paramount thing, in Jackson Pollock's phrase, is to "struggle out of chaos toward the emotional image of the artist's inner self."

Their real direction might be defined as a great turn away from reality, from the reality of scientific war and a peace of nuclear terror, toward the depths of their own unconscious minds where they find the "unpredictable." (It was much the same with the occult and Freudian surrealists after World War I, though they used figurative methods.) Now the unconscious mind certainly harbors the spontaneous, the surprising, and the original. But did not Freud himself teach us that it is also a source of chaos and destruction, against which measures of control must be developed?

The suspicion grows upon some of us that the new abstract artists, one of these days, will want out. They will want to get away from the limitations of their cult, from the very clichés it will have accumulated, such as affect every aesthetic revolution after a certain age. The movement of the American Abstract Artists is not *the* culminating episode in the history of Western art, as some of its more fervid apologists believe. It is an episode period.

Will not the abstract-expressionists grow weary of painting landscapes without a geography, or street scenes with no address? The technical level of their work has been rising impressively. Some of their canvases have rhythmic or plastic organizations that please us for the same reasons that make the plastic scheme of a Rubens seem right to us— save that the descriptive figuration of natural elements is eliminated. But after viewing a great many of such pictures we begin to feel that we have lost our memory of the real world of trees and cows, and are perhaps, victims of amnesia.

The history of art, in truth, is made up of broad cyclical swings, as successive generations of craftsmen shift their attention now to one aspect of the art problem, or now to others previously ignored. The Impressionists, for example, were all preoccupied with the treatment of light and color, neglecting structure. The Cubists, on the other hand, gave their impassioned attention to structure and volume in space, while relatively indifferent to color.

I remember how, during a visit to Paris shortly after World War I, I could find literally nothing but Cubist canvases in the art shops. Suddenly, in 1922, Picasso and Braque broke away from Cubism and turned to representational and neo-classical techniques. There was a temporary crash in the market for Cubist pictures; all the crowd of painters in Paris then altered their style to suit the new modes. Now again, as I noticed during a visit to France last summer, the great art-centre of Paris is offering quantities of abstractions done in the expressionist style favored by the new crop of American art lovers; Paris seemed to be following the lead of New York, so far as the work of the younger men was concerned. Much of this seemed so repetitive, so much the *same picture*, that I became convinced there would soon come another of those great mutations of art history to sweep them all aside.¹ In imagination I foresaw the ruins of the abstractionists' "empire," and began to press some of my artist friends with the question: where do we go from here?

It was at this time that I happened fortunately to meet again with Jean Hélion, one of the most knowledgeable of contemporary French artists, and, though still in the very prime of life, a man who had been through a good many of the wars of art. In the period between 1935 and 1945 Hélion had been regarded as one of the outstanding abstract artists of the generation after Picasso. But on his return from the real wars (against Hitler's men), during which he had borne much hardship as a soldier and as a prisoner in Germany's labor camps, his ideas about painting had completely changed. He had converted himself, as I had heard, from an abstract to a figurative painter and, thereafter, carried on a sort of one-man crusade for a realistic art.

I had read something of the critics' polemics over Hélion's "conversion"; and had heard that a few hotheads in the abstract camp had even assailed him as a "renegade" and a "traitor to art." To the partisans of abstraction the apostasy of a man like Hélion appeared all the more scandalous for his having been, in earlier years, one of the leading prophets of their cult. His later "realistic" pictures more-

¹ It is significant that Alfred H. Barr Jr., of the Museum of Modern Art, has written recently that Abstract-expressionism "is bound to generate a reaction," if only because of the force of the movement itself. His guarded prophecy is of "a new concern with figure, and a movement toward a new severe style."

over had been poorly received, and were, in fact, treated as outmoded by the important art-dealers who had once represented him profitably in New York as well as Paris. In short he had suffered somewhat for having abandoned his non-objective style, but continued stubbornly on the new course he had set for himself.

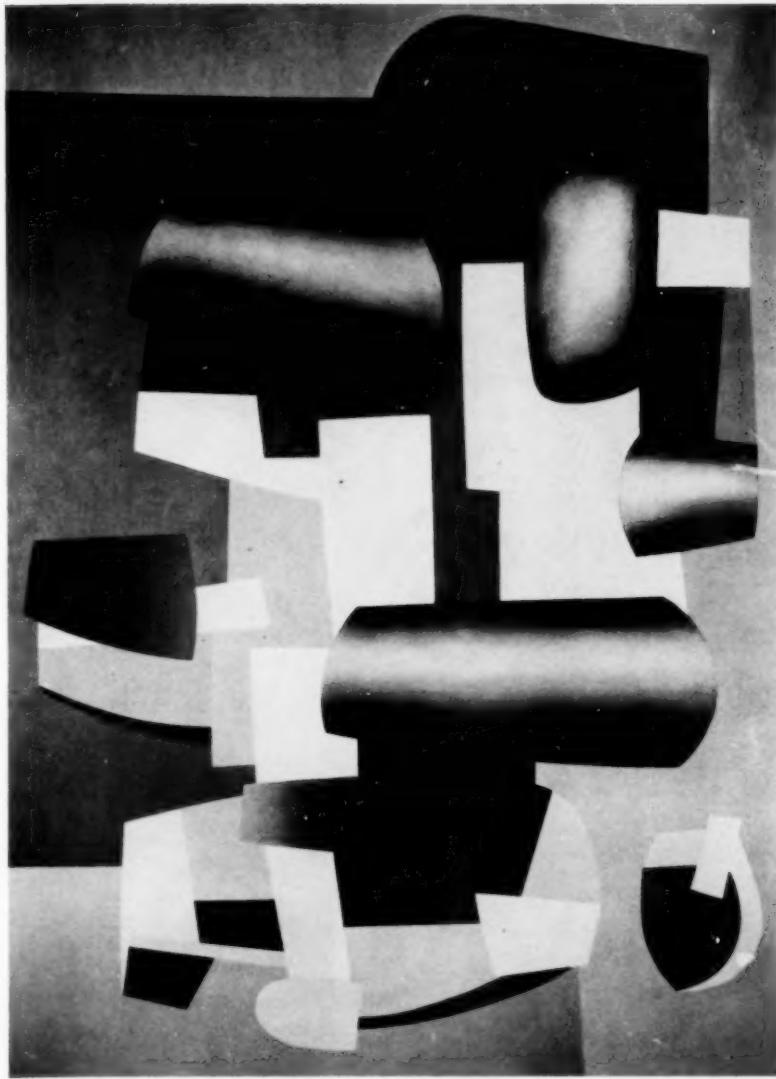
A man like Hélion, who is no conformist and turns away from success and fashion to follow his own ideas, has always seemed to me worth watching. As I had admired his earlier abstracts of the 1930's—which are included in many American museum and private collections—I was eager both to learn about his "conversion" and to see the works of his later period.

It was not the less interesting that he happened to have lived and worked in the United States for several years, both prior to the war and afterward, and knew our avant-garde artists well. He had even enjoyed a certain influence over the young men who were to figure in the postwar non-objective movement, and appreciated both their potentialities and the dangers they faced.

He himself had given many of the best years of his life to abstract composition. The change-over to a realistic method involved a costly struggle with himself, years of intensive retraining in traditional techniques. The story of his self-reformation, so to speak—of his having pursued abstraction to its farthest limits, of the impact of his wartime experiences, and his decision to start all over again—all of it as told by this highly informed and eloquent artist, seemed not only absorbing in itself, but important for the light it shed upon our problem.

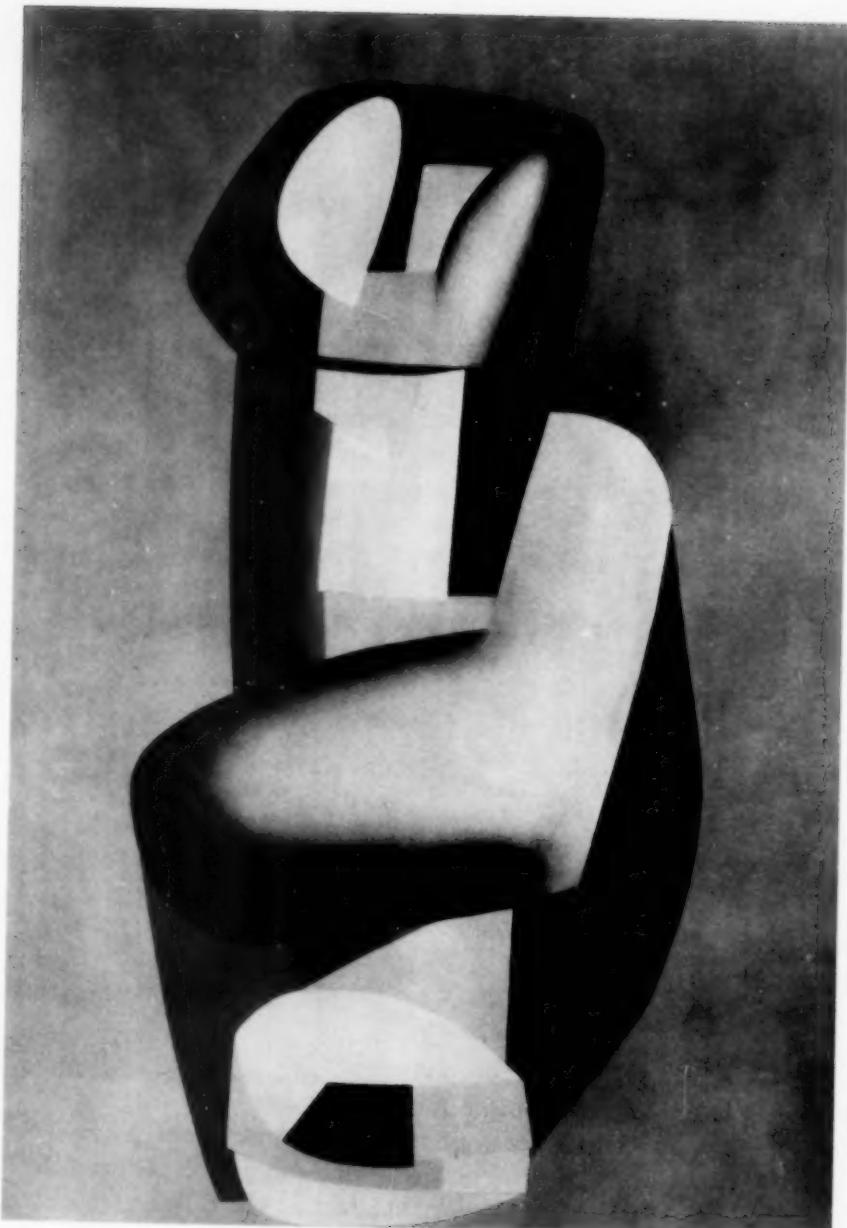
"Yesterday," he says, "it was most fascinating to see how painting entered upon abstraction; tomorrow it will be no less interesting to learn how painting will have found its way out." As always there will be many different roads for the artists. Hélion's story, at any rate, is that of one who found his own road back.

He is a small man, though of sturdy figure and energetic, even incisive, movements, with eyes that are very keen, expressive and unresting. Born in a small town in Normandy, Couterne (Orne), in 1904, and of a working-class family, Jean Hélion drew and painted pictures from boyhood on and taught himself without benefit of art teachers. At sixteen, after qualifying in a competitive examination, he was enabled to take up the study of engineering at the Uni-



(COLLECTION OF PEGGY GUGGENHEIM, VENICE)

Big Volumes, 1935



Blue Figure, 1936



The Girl with Yellow Hair, 1944



Newspaper Readers, 1950



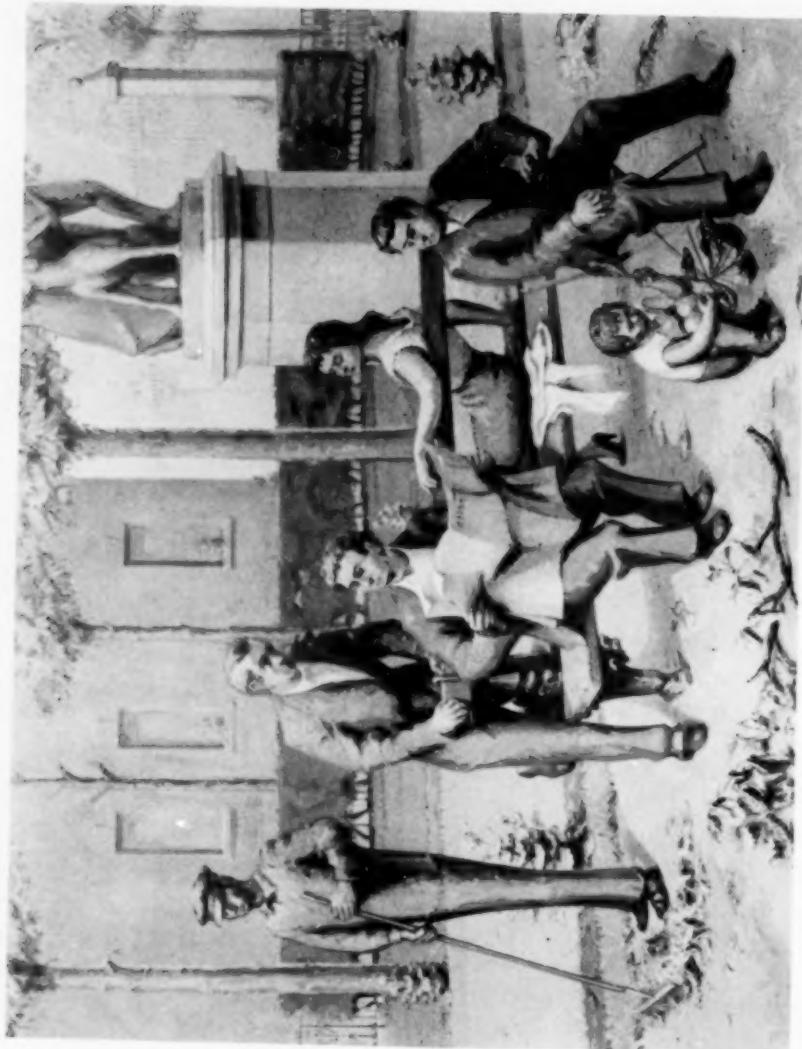
Mannequins with Dying Man, 1951



Of Pumpkins, 1952



Self Portrait, 1954



In the Luxembourg Gardens, 1955-56

versity of Lille. But a year later, finding that this was not his vocation, he came to Paris to earn his living as an apprentice draftsman, studying architecture at night at the Ecole des Arts Décoratifs. For several years he would rise at dawn to go on with his oil painting, and would return to it also in the small hours of the night. At the time he lived in the Montmartre, and on Sundays would bring his canvases to the Foire aux Croutes, where the poor "calendar artists" of his quarter used to line up to exchange their daubs for a crust of bread.

By the age of twenty-one he was earning enough from the sale of his pictures to subsist; he dropped his drafting work, and devoted his full time to painting and to instructing himself systematically. The approach to engineering and architecture undoubtedly contributed to his feeling for tight organization, shown in his early still-lifes as in his later abstracts. From the time of his apprentice years he also showed a passion for research in the technique of painting.

He had been very much on his own, holding himself aloof from the various art cliques of Paris, until 1928, when he met Torres-Garcia, who introduced him to Piet Mondrian and his group of "classical" abstractionists. Hélion now embraced the doctrines of pure abstraction with ardor, at a time when its adherents were a small minority group carrying on from the point where the early Cubists of 1908-1913 had left off. It was a brave, new and aseptic world into which young Hélion now swam; his painting henceforth was confined to colored surfaces of rectangular form, the opposition of straight lines, the relationship of some oblongs, and the tensions of a few primary colors. In a number of small periodicals of 1929-1930, such as *Abstraction-Création*, Hélion, together with Theo Van Doesburg and other purists, did some fervent crusading. Art, he held, must become entirely impersonal and universal; it must seek "constant and fixed certainties, controlled by logic," he proclaimed in an article entitled: "Art and Mathematics." The ultimate aim was to create a new "poetry of Construction."

After a year or two of this minimal or "puritanical" art, he began to step out of bounds. Instead of confining himself to pure geometrical forms and simple linear movements, he introduced curved forms that contrasted with his oblongs; until, by 1934, he had come to use solid, modeled, three-dimensional forms, cylinders, spheres,

blocks—abstract configurations, yet vaguely reminiscent of natural forms. In recollection he has said: "Natural or man-made objects kept coming into my head, but I would suppress them sternly." Moreover, he organized the movement of his forms, within his rigorously shaped space, into highly complex equilibriums; and used gradations of color value as well as sharply contrasting elementary colors.

The worthy Mondrian, seeing these pictures, said in a tone of kindly reproof: "But you are really an artist of the naturalistic tradition!" Hélion did not realize it at the time, but it was true.

His "monumental" abstraction, made up of smooth, metallic "non-objects" acting upon each other with great tension, won Hélion much acclaim during the 'thirties. The play of novel lighting effects also entered into these compositions, whose controlled power and varied activity made them well worth meditating.

As Hélion's work showed more and more nostalgia for the world of man and nature, the pure abstractionists expressed some disapproval; but Léger, Arp, Lipchitz and Alexander Calder, at the time, gave him their blessing. His canvases nowadays bore titles frankly declaring them to be "Figures in Space," or "Blue Figure," or "Pink Figure"; and they had (vaguely) heads and feet. Exhibited in shows in London in 1935, and in New York the following year, the new, more elaborated abstracts were much favored in the circles of the modernists as three-dimentional dramas of great intellectual coherence. At this period the thirty-year old Hélion was ranked "as one of the mature leaders of the modern movement," according to Herbert Read, "and in the direct line of descent from Cézanne, Seurat, Gris and Léger." In America, Meyer Schapiro observed that, unlike the Mondrian school, Hélion "sought a return path to the fullness of nature within the framework of abstract art."

It is notable that at this time he was writing with admiration of Cimabue's and Poussin's way of filling space. Abstract art was still the right path for him; but, he held, instead of continuing as an "art of reduction," it must grow, must make a place for the contributions of the Raphaels and Poussins as well as for those of the early cubists and Mondrian.

Later Hélion wrote of this phase: "For years I built for myself a subtle instrument of relationships—colors and forms without a

name. I played on it my secret songs, unexplained, passionate and peaceful."

But his own work was evolving further. The extreme limitations he sensed in all current abstract art made that seem to him increasingly arid and cold. He was engaged in constant experiments that searched for new directions. Where would it all lead? He himself did not know, as he said in 1935. But he was "afraid of the future—he would in fact welcome a way back to social integration, a functional art of some kind."

During the 1920's the Abstractionists, the German Bauhaus group of industrial designers, and the new architects all had the dream of some well ordered utopia, or welfare state, in which their neat and logical constructions might find their proper place. But whereas the postwar American abstractionists seem to Hélion to be determined to "escape" from the real world, or simply to rebel against it, the *ordered* abstractions which he and his associates of the 1930's were painting embodied the hope of "improving" things. "We were possessed by visions of a new civilization to come, very pure and elevated," he has said, "in fact some ideal form of socialism such as we had dreamed of since the war of 1914-1918."

Instead of this the 1930's witnessed a tragic economic depression, the rise of Fascist dictators in Europe, the wasting Civil War in Spain. Very much the political man, Hélion felt himself deeply affected by the increasingly pessimistic atmosphere of France and all Europe, whose foundations seemed to him more and more shaky. In 1936 he decided to migrate to America. The Rooseveltian America was a haven of liberalism and progress and seemed to him to constitute the last best hope for civilization. Hélion also hoped that America's mastery of technology and industrial efficiency would be accompanied by the production of new and beautiful art works. "I arrived in the United States with the idea of establishing myself there more or less permanently and finding inspiration for new compositions."

In New York he was well received by what was then only a small brave band of non-figurative artists, including Alexander Calder, George K. L. Morris, De Kooning, Holty and a few others. After a year in a studio on Sheridan Square, having married an American girl who was a native of Virginia, Hélion moved to a village in the Blue Ridge mountains, where he produced some of the most im-

posing of his abstract canvases.

The darkening world scene, at the time of the Munich Pact, continued to trouble his mind even in his remote Virginia studio. "Fear possessed me, and the certainty of war," he has related. "I truly smelled blood, death, heaps of corpses everywhere." In haste he labored to finish some last abstract paintings: a three-panel frieze, with a flying figure and a fallen figure; a "Double-Figure," which went to the Chicago Art Institute, and is considered by him the most successful of his abstracts; and in early 1939, a "Fallen Figure" of very ominous character, which concluded his abstract phase. "I knew I was carrying on with abstraction to its very end—for me," he said of the two years' output in Virginia. With those paintings of big constructions crashing down, he felt he could stop. They were, in effect his last testament to non-objective art.

He had taken out first papers for American citizenship; but after war came to Europe, he decided to return to France, arriving there in January, 1940. "I hated the war," he said, "but thought I ought to go because I was, perhaps, one of those who hadn't done enough to prevent it."

In June, 1940, Sergeant Hélion, with a company of reserve troops waiting to go into battle, was sketching the hills south of the Loire River, when the war suddenly rolled in upon him. Its first apparition was a long, gloomy column of refugees riding in farm wagons, or pushing prams. His company then carried out a confused retreating movement until it was surrounded by the Germans, a few days before France capitulated. After a sort of death march during four days without food, Hélion and his comrades were shipped by cattle-car to a labor camp at an estate farm in East Germany. A year later they were removed to a Stalag in the harbor of Stettin. At the time of his capture Hélion had on his person a sketchbook he had bought at Woolworth's in New York. When he was stripped, deloused and numbered by his guards, his much-thumbed sketchbook was seized and thrown on a pile of prisoners' goods to be confiscated. "It was then I knew that they were making war against Man, the individual within!—who questioned things when given orders."

At Stettin the university-educated artist, who had studied German, was chosen to serve as interpreter and clerk in the office of the Stalag commander. In secret he also acted as a member of the prisoners'

Central Committee, which plotted sabotage, planned a few escapes, and maintained a hidden control over the wretched French slave-laborers.

In the Stalag, Hélion came to know and love his comrades, most of them plain folk, who, in their extremity, showed true courage and ran great risks to help each other. How much they esteemed him is shown by the fact that their underground committee selected him as one of the few who would be helped to escape. In the prison camp's Black Market civilian clothes were quietly bought and forged papers were devised for him; during long weeks the plan for his flight was rehearsed.

Every morning contingents of prisoners would be sent out to labor in nearby factories. One evening, while a volley-ball game was being played in the yard among the prisoners remaining there, a simulated mêlée was staged—just as the gates were opened to admit other prisoners returning from work. As Hélion wrote afterward:

Their sentry followed . . . Four hands were stretched toward me by my comrades behind me. Marquet held my briefcase; Finot held a wallet with my money and papers; Moineau and David held nothing but their fingers . . . They felt rough and kind and warm. At this moment the volley-ball hit the ground. Duclos ran toward Desprez with fists raised. The guards all rushed up to intervene . . .

Shedding his prison cloak, Hélion shot through the gates, now clad in civilian garments and with the passport of a Flemish worker. Riding trains, hitching hikes on trucks across Germany, slipping through guarded frontiers with the help of secret guides, he eventually reached Vichy France, and, by the winter of 1943, was back in Virginia. He wrote:

To escape from a prison camp required a very special state of mind; not only loathing of captivity, but a faith, a hope that is even stronger. I left behind me brave men, whom captivity had robbed of all hope. They too loved their families, longed for their villages: yet lacked the faith that drove one to dare . . . the fearful chance of escape.

It was a time of revelations for him. Even the most rational of men, under great stress, may be transported by a new faith and behave like mystics. Helion knew that he owed his freedom as much to the self-sacrifice of his fellow-men in Arbeitskommando XIII, Stettin, as to his own fierce will and love of life. After that, he declared, "to return to freedom was to fall to one's knees before the real world and adore

it." In prison he had been able to sketch nothing but figures from life, his guards, his companions in misery. Now all his desires centered on "rediscovering and singing of the prosaic and yet beautiful world of men and objects so long barred from me by a barbed wire fence." And, he added: "During the many months in prison camp, all abstract images vanished from my mind."

Before leaving for America, he happened to see his old friend Jean Arp and confided to him his new resolutions. Arp protested: "But it is impossible! Everything in the way of representation has already been done by the old masters." Hélion, however, clung to the belief that "in escaping from the Stalag I had also escaped from Abstraction."

While convalescing in his Virginia home he wrote a book recording his prison experiences and escape, entitled: *They Shall Not Have Me . . .* Published originally in (Hélion's) English by Dutton & Co. of New York, in 1943, the book was received by the press as a work of astonishing literary power and one of the most realistic accounts of World War II from the French side. It was very widely read, too; and the author, who seemed the embodiment of France's rising spirit of resistance to her conquerors, was much complimented for his daring military action. But when he showed his new figurative pictures to his artist friends of the abstract camp, they paid him no compliments and drew long faces.

Between 1944 and 1947 Hélion had a series of one-man shows—at the Paul Rosenberg Gallery in New York and in Paris—of his new realistic pictures. They reincarnated the figures of human beings banished from his canvases since the 1920's. These new pictures focussed on the familiar and commonplace objects that he had heard the men in his prison camp talking about as the things they missed most, hence associated with the sense of lost freedom: the café at the corner, the newspaper kiosk, the girls in doorways and windows along the street, the golden-crusted French bread they lacked, the cigarettes denied them. One of the pictures was of a man with hat drawn over his face ceremoniously lighting a cigarette; others were of men doffing their hats to each other, carrying umbrellas with pomp, reading newspapers, or simply showing loaves of bread spread out. Abstraction had eliminated man; Hélion was bent on celebrating man and the paraphernalia of his domestic life, all the commonplace, even

absurd, gestures or objects that were recurrent in man's world and yet seldom observed. He was seeking, in short, to create a mythology of everyday life. "I am through with painting only for specialists," he declared.

In this first stage of the transition to figurative art he showed himself still dominated by his experience as an abstractionist : these pictures were essentially compositions of flat colored surfaces, in luscious pink, orange or blue, the figures mere contours. Critics and the art public showed little taste for these works, some of which looked like colored advertising posters. In the postwar years Americans were turning with a new interest to abstract painting and sculpture.

Hélion retreated to France in 1946 to find that there too his new work was unpopular — an unfamiliar experience to him. Nevertheless he carried on a one-man crusade for a return to an art of realism, through public statements in the press as well as his paintings. There was a movement toward socialist realism that had a temporary vogue after the war ; but Hélion stood apart from it. He said that he had no simplified concepts of partisanship or conformity to offer. His own faith held that "good and evil cannot be separated"; it summoned the artist "to discover the real world that is always unknown, and learn how strange men are to each other." No propaganda value here.

For his subjects he continued to go to the folklore of the streets outside his studio. There were men in baggy or balloon-like garments, a series of mannequins in shop windows, busts or clothing-dummies regarding with sightless eyes a living figure, lying prone on the sidewalk below them. Notable also was a large painting entitled *Grande Journerie* (1951) presenting a group of five men seated on a park bench, with backs turned to each other while they devoured their newspapers. The white forms of the newspapers take wing, fly off in all directions. The scene in the public park becomes a kind of forum where men of modern times congregate to perform their ritual gestures. As time passed, Hélion's canvases became more filled with descriptive detail, objects and figures were partially modeled ; their structure, however, still recalled the abstract organization of his work of the 1930's.

One critical commentator, Pierre Loeb, remarked that Hélion's pictures of this period were uncommonly "acrid, sour and without

charm or any concession to good taste." His figures, clothed or nude, spread their limbs about as if they were still metallic, and half-opened their eyes that had been too long closed. It was as if, after having been inanimate and mechanical, those forms were just beginning to emerge from their frozen state. But at least, M. Loeb concluded, Hélion was trying to restore the figure of man to the artist's world.

A new and more literally descriptive stage of realism was reflected in his painting toward 1951-1952, in which the artist gave himself to intense meditation of natural objects, instead of imposing his own intellectual formulations upon them. His interest was now fixed on still lifes of vegetables, flowers, plants, and interiors. To study his subjects the better he would fill up his big studio with merchandise from the green grocer's, especially pumpkins, which held his attention for a long time. There was also a collection of umbrellas, heaps of old clothes, and even a regulation park bench borrowed with the permission of the keepers of the Luxembourg Gardens.

Hélion was now trying to identify himself as fully as possible with the materials and objects chosen for his pictures. Or, as he phrases it, he tried to comprehend what was within their visual skins. For "reality" was after all that which was most mysterious. But after long contemplation an object could become so much a part of the artist's mind and being that he should be able to turn his back on it when painting. "It is like loving a woman — if you have really possessed her and she is part of your being, you can love her just as much if she is off in China."

To this period belongs his imposing "Still Life with Pumpkin" (1952), featured by a severed pumpkin on a table opening dragon-like jaws to devour the spectator. Another work of the same period, "Le Gouter," is also filled with the tensions of its vegetable forms, and achieves a powerful continuity of movement that the eye follows irresistibly to every corner of the canvas. Everything here is treated with hard dry brush strokes that reflect the artist's will to give not the decorative but the unadorned truth, or at least his image of it.

"It is not of beauty that we must speak," he declares, "but of goodness in the sense that bread is good, hence magnificent."

These pictures trouble the viewer ; they are intended to do so. Similarly with the series of nudes waiting disconsolately in the studio, the figures of men sitting for their portraits, or a pair of lovers stroll-

ing under an umbrella. All are shown under a pale and cruel light that is part of the artist's image. Hélion's characteristic trait, at this stage, is his persistence, his fanatical will to describe the commonplace and present it with unyielding surface. The human figures communicate with us, yet retain their sense of solitude ; we try to understand them, yet they evade us, like faces out of the *Lonely Crowd*. At this period Hélion felt that he had reached the full antithesis of abstraction.

Since 1955, however, or within the past five years, his style has been modified again. Having reached the ripeness of middle age, his fifties, he arrives at a greater serenity of mood in his later work. His effort to embrace a reality that has nothing of the photographic is continued — "but at the level where the real communicates with the dream." He departs from the studio to go to the country and paint flowers, trees in bud, the rocky shores and seascapes of his summer place in Brittany. His approach to subject matter has gained in economy and directness ; the gymnastic of his brush has become more buoyant, the style more free, and even lyrical.

For many years he has been occupied with an immense canvas, of about 13 by 10 feet, whose subject is the Luxembourg Gardens just outside his door. It is filled with the people and objects he has "lived with" for years : persons on a park bench, a statue, a child, a gardener, trees, and the ubiquitous newspaper reader. In preparation for this picture he has done scores of preliminary oil sketches, many of which have been sold ; but still unsatisfied, he continues to work from time to time on this large canvas which he conceives as a summing up of his ideas, inventions and dreams.

In former times artists generally applied themselves all their lives to some single aspect of the art problem ; the Impressionists, for example, mainly concerned themselves with light. Hélion, while still of middle age, has attacked many different aspects of the same problem with great intelligence and boundless energy, which is what lends interest to his periodic metamorphoses. Like Delacroix, he has found relief in keeping a journal recording his day-by-day searches, the victories and defeats experienced in the silence of the studio. In an entry for May, 1954, Helion writes :

When a man turns away from abstraction and comes back to figuration, he is faced with many difficulties of an unexpected character. He

soon finds that he must work much harder than before ; not only is all his painterly skill needed, but also judgment of the social and human values of the objects depicted.

When painting after nature, the artist must deal with the complexity of natural forms and struggle to put things in order of importance, creating a sort of hierarchy of plastic values, in spite of the confusion of detail.

How much easier it would be to work in the abstract :

A big spot of color, cleverly contrived, and shot into the middle of a canvas gives the effect of a thunderclap. A pure angle, carefully calculated, captures the eye ; and an equilibrium of contrasts, presented in abstract signs, may be something formidable. It looks good above the mantelpiece, and sets everything in its place.

But in painting from life, and attempting to keep to the objective appearance of things, one may easily become distracted, or misled into little side-paths. "Here the going is thick . . . and the results, at first glance, unimpressive when compared with the abstracts one used to make."

The artist's moods of discouragement (though never enduring) are also reflected in passages of his diaries. He is aware that he is one of the few, along with the great sculptor-painter Giacometti, and also Balthus, in France, who have rejected the trend of fashion. He wonders if he alone can be right ; and observes ruefully that his figurative pictures nowadays "sing before a public that is absent." Nevertheless, he is firm in his conviction that he must accept the order of nature as his way of thinking and working, while "mistrusting that which men invent when they believe everything is permitted them." He continues :

I would like to say to Joan Miro . . . Put back those lovely spots that are now at liberty — where they belong, in the form of flowers, animals, people. Let Calder realize, as he himself has proved, that the most beautiful mobiles are branches of trees, blades of grass.

The abstract-expressionism of men like Jackson Pollock, he believes, embodies a "poetry of destruction."

Hélion now experiences a new joy in expressing his emotions about living creatures or plants ; he finds himself even trying to "mime" them in the effort to know them better. What a vibrant sensual pleasure is afforded by rendering all the emerald and yellow-ochre being of a simple green plant in a pot. In place of the abstract forms of the past the mysterious forms of nature reappear. Recalling his own non-

figurative period, he writes (June 13, 1953):

When the artist begins to feel the passion for pure forms and uses then without regard to their origin, objects disappear, much in the way a landscape is gradually covered during a snowfall. We see only white, that becomes ever more dazzling, and soon nothing but whiteness . . . Everything seems far-off, hidden, absent. And now we find ourselves in limbo!

Seeing the familiar world disappear from his canvas, the artist is seized with a sort of vertigo and cannot stop himself from rushing on, as if toward the highest peaks of the universe.

But in truth, he is really throwing himself into an abyss, the void.

In rebuilding his real world, however, the painter feels an intoxication that is entirely different : out of the midst of absence real objects that had long been invisible reappear. That colored trapezoid, always present in my old abstractions, becomes a vase, that yellow spot a flower; that deep red surface a skinned rabbit ; that rectangular system of lines, a work of architecture, a door, a window.

I feel the desire to cry out to everyone : "Come, look ! I have escaped from the great void !"

Thus Jean Hélion nowadays goes on painting heads, human forms, trees, flowers. He says with characteristic resolution : "We must give back to art its mission and power of language."

REVIEWS

David Ferry

A Poem About Catastrophe

Allen Tate, *Collected Essays*, Denver, Alan Swallow, 1959. \$6.00.

Perhaps this essay should be as personal in tone as possible. I think I am in many ways reasonably representative of some people who returned from the Army just after the war to become teachers of English literature and to become, or to aspire to become, writers. Much of my education was gotten from distinguished critics and poets like Mr. Tate, either directly, by reading their works, or indirectly, by the teaching of men who had been strongly influenced by them. So my case, unoriginal as it is, may be interesting to read about.

First, the clear and permanent gain. Mr. Tate, who is in so many honorable ways "the man of letters in the modern world," asks what that man should be, and answers himself as follows:

He must do first what he has always done: he must recreate for his age the image of man, and he must propagate standards by which other men may test that image, and distinguish the false from the true. But at our own critical moment, the man of letters might do well to conceive his responsibility more narrowly. He has an immediate responsibility, to other men no less than himself, for the vitality of language. He must distinguish the difference between mere communication . . . and the rediscovery of the human condition in the living arts.

And again:

We cannot expect the business man and the politician, the men who run the state, to know that our particular responsibility exists; we cannot ask them to understand the more difficult fact that our responsibility to them is for the language which they themselves use for the general welfare.

Everything here is eloquent, powerfully felt, health-giving. For me, critics like Mr. Tate were speaking not only to the writer but to the critic and teacher as well in such paragraphs, and they defined my vocation for me. They still do.

They give adequate reasons not only for believing that the writing of poetry is still a worthy occupation but also the teaching of Freshman English.

But I also really wanted to cultivate my garden, to cultivate a kind of moral privacy which would have to take as little account as honor would allow of the larger social, moral, philosophical questions, the questions of belief, and I suppose this spiritual condition is diagnosable exactly in Mr. Tate's terms, and in those of critics like him. I had no secure objective framework of beliefs. So I read his criticism in a very odd way. When Mr. Tate said that the responsibility of a poet was to be a poet, it was a statement I could use on behalf of my own moral privacy; and I could translate it into the terms of criticism and teaching as well. The great contribution of criticism like Mr. Tate's was for me, and is, its concern for "the health of the language"; and indeed it is clear that one of the good things about our century is the realization by many that the very terms of our discourse are both causes and effects of our trouble, and that if we are looking for cures it is at least possible we may find some in the study of our language. The sense of this heightened my pleasure in choosing to try to be a teacher and a poet; but it was also an excuse. I felt freed by such views to concentrate, for example, on the writing of verse which was satisfied if it could clear away a little of the underbrush and overgrowth of my own personal experience, and which avoided reference to general ideas, or to my general environment, as much as possible. And my deepest pleasure in reading poetry was in parallel experiences. That is to say, the "close attention to language" which Mr. Tate recommended, meant for me, because it had to, the cultivation of personal concerns; as I understand it, the close attention to the language in a poet and critic like Mr. Tate means the cultivation of personal concerns in a larger and more comprehensive context. I understood that this was so, but I did not understand it in the deep sense that could use it, and so I really missed the fact that Mr. Tate was a much larger critic even than I had supposed. And at the same time, I did not see that there were assumptions in his criticism to which I could not give my assent.

By his "largeness" as a critic, I mean two related things: his criticism has a range of reference which permits him to connect his particularly literary insights to matters of far more general and public concern, to compare states of culture, to talk about past, present and future in intelligible ways (and without resorting to any excessively technical language, thus preserving successfully the tone of a human and complete person, the *man* of letters in the modern world); and his critical and social assumptions have a general consistency which gives us a sense of completeness and of moral security which is its own authority. That is, his range is not only wide but the things in it are coherently related to one another. Thus his acute criticism of Hart Crane's poetry as a poetry of sensation

makes lucid sense in the context of his general analysis of Romantic poetry, both that optimistic sort which tries to do the work of science, and does it badly, and that other sort which despairs against the dominance of science, retreating to the mere expression of feeling, the display of disattached sensibility. And this is the context in which his analysis of Poe is meaningful not only in itself but in the relation Mr. Tate makes between Poe and ourselves, his cousins. When he turns his attention to a matter so "special" as the teaching of literature in the graduate schools, we discover that it is not special at all but another instance of the tyranny of positivism (or "naturalism" or "secularism") in our time, so that historical scholarship of the sort Mr. Tate deplores is, like the sort of Romantic poetry he deplores, attempting to imitate the methods of a discipline alien to what its own nature ought to be, attempting to do the work of science and doing it badly. And this in turn enables us to understand why so many of such scholars are, in their literary judgments, mere aesthetes, responding "to the aesthetic object [merely] in terms of sensation." When Hart Crane makes company with John Livingston Lowes, we have not only a dazzling instance of "heterogeneous ideas yoked by violence together," but an instance of the completeness, the stability and security of authoritative critical assumptions which find for everything their place and which make serious judgment possible. What is so thrilling about the *Collected Essays* is not only its "engagement," its concern with so many things that are important in our world, but its wholeness, its coherence which is also its lucidity, everything illuminating everything else. So that, for still another example, the remarks of this Southerner on the South are never parochial, since they are made in an intellectual and emotional context whose terms are more comprehensive even than those of that wide subject. And the context is wide enough to allow for considerable flexibility, as in the brilliant essay "A Southern Mode of the Imagination," which implicitly treats what one is likely to expect of the usual 'Southern view' with illuminating irony.

All this in a tone which for me is far more humane than all but the best of Eliot's criticism, which is at the same time very similar to Mr. Tate's in many respects. If one is moved by the completeness and range of Mr. Tate's field of reference, one is moved also by the seriousness and simplicity of the voice one hears talking in these essays. He says somewhere that "critical style ought to be plain as the nose on one's face . . .; it ought not to compete in the detail of sensibility with the work which it is privileged to report on." For the most part the style in this volume handsomely fulfills this requirement.

The result, looked at from one point of view, is a humanism (I hope Mr. Tate will not mind the term) which is moving and inspiring. Here, for example, he is talking about what happens when the balance of powers within us is upset;

We are saying that our minds move through three necessities which,

when in proper harmony and relation, achieve a dynamic and precarious unity of experience. Now that our oration is over I may say quite plainly that the three necessities . . . are the three liberal arts. And any one of them practiced to the exclusion of the others retires a portion of our experience into the shadows of the occult, the contingent, the uncontrolled. The grammarians of the modern world have allowed their specialization, the operational technique, to drive the two other arts to cover, whence they break forth in their own furies, the one the fury of irresponsible abstraction, the other the fury of irresponsible rhetoric.

This is criticism in a great and permanent tradition, and the power of the prose here is a sign of its validity.

I saw all this, the power of general reference, and the powerful sense of completeness, yet it did not impinge on me in quite the way it perhaps ought to have done. The very largeness, the power of general reference itself, was foreign at the time to what I was asking. I was not uninterested in it, not at all, but I brought to it only the kind of alert attention which was the sign of my disengagement from it. I was much more interested in that sort of "close attention to the language," to the texture and detail of experience, which allowed me to keep my private concerns, my moral privacy. And I seem to myself to be characteristic of others in this respect. The poetry of the post-war generation is obviously more "personal" in the way I mean than the poetry of the twenties, thirties, and early forties, more provisional or perhaps simply more unsure in its assumptions. (No doubt it is a far inferior poetry to that of the earlier period, but I am not at all sure there is a clear cause-and-effect relationship here.) The criticism of the post-war generation seems to me in general to be correspondingly more provisional than that of the earlier period, less comprehensive in its field of reference, displaying "personality" and "private opinion" more freely, without clear reference to large assumptions. The admirably honest editor's preface to the first issue of this very magazine is a case in point: "Many contemporary little magazines, try to imitate the spirit of some of their great predecessors of the twenties and thirties, have tortured themselves into artificial poses of truculence . . . We have only a few clear principles . . . , and these turn out to be a love of good writing, a desire not to let criticism dominate the field in the magazine, and an intention "to keep our editorial mouths shut after this little initial splurge of self-analysis." This amounts to a refusal to have a point of view, in the sense that Mr. Tate has a point of view, and I find the refusal congenial. If I think it suggests some limitations, I think it also suggests some positive values.

But it was not only that the power of general reference, the largeness of his criticism, could not affect me as deeply as it might otherwise have done.

It was also something about what I have called the completeness or the coherence of Mr. Tate's world, and the world of critics like him. In one sense it included more than I really wanted to deal with; in another it seemed too definite, it seemed to stand by certain absolutes which I could not stand by, or — to say this same thing another way — it seemed to leave out certain possibilities of experience and so threatened to prevent me from taking the tentative, the provisional attitudes towards experience that I wanted to take, that I had to take whether I wanted to or not. Here follows a list of some things that seem to me to be left out, or of some questions that the very coherence and lucidity of Mr. Tate's world bring to mind. It is an appropriate emblem of the tentative or provisional attitudes I am talking about, that I should end this piece with such a list.

For one thing, I can not be sure to what degree Mr. Tate really believed in the humanistic solution he proposed, the balance of the three necessities, the three liberal arts. That is to say, I can be sure that he believed in them as an ideal — almost no one has expressed their value better — but the whole tenor of the essays seems to cast in doubt the possibility of their fulfillment, of their ever coming into balance again. The tenor of the essays, unless I mistake it, is pessimistic and even despairing, at least about our cultural or social salvation. The tone is valedictory. This is said with characteristic power:

Sometimes I think that life is a dream, and that what I am really doing is not what I do. I sit, in doubt between waking and sleeping, on the keel of a capsized boat, eating barnacles with my old friend Arthur Gordon Pym and pretending that the hull is a continent.

It is said with characteristic power, and it is therefore very compelling, but I am not sure, possibly because I am not sure of anything of this sort, that it reflects the truth. The ideal, or at least the superior, conditions of the past, the South, the Feudal Age, as Mr. Tate describes them, are significant pastoral images by which to measure the insufficiencies and confusions of our own time; they are dreams of a life in which it was possible to experience things more concretely, more spontaneously, less abstractly and mechanically than perhaps we do now. They are instruments by which Mr. Tate has measured much of what our life might have been and much of what it is, and they are therefore extremely valuable. But I do think I am right in saying that the tone is valedictory and that these pastoral images therefore tell us only what we might have been, not what we ought to be. The *Collected Essays*, that is to say, are a beautiful poem about catastrophe rather than a statement of the dangers and possibilities of life. And as with any such pastoral images, there comes a moment when we ask questions about what is left out. One asks questions about the South today, about what is happening there, and one wonders how the (limited, provisional) good things that seem to be happening there would fit into this

pastoral image. (I hasten to say, as I said before, that Mr. Tate is much more interestingly critical about the South than most other Southern writers. This has the curious effect of increasing the South's power as a pastoral image, since it is made more convincing.)

And I wonder whether optimism and science are not absolutely equated in these essays, and treated rather too simply. The provisional, the limited good things of which science is capable are almost left out of account. (They are once or twice mentioned in passing.) And though Mr. Tate nobly envisions an ideal balance of the liberal arts, I think it is not unjust to say that the scientist as Mr. Tate consistently pictures him would make such a balance an impossibility: "a remarkably ingenious and dynamic fellow whose simple fanaticism brooks no compromise with his special projects." To say that this is over-simple, that it is a figure in a nightmare of catastrophe is not to deny the force of Mr. Tate's warnings about an abstract and mechanical future. C. P. Snow is undoubtedly right when he says the scientist is not necessarily as "shallowly optimistic" as the literary intellectual is likely to suppose, and that the scientist's frequent commitment to the limited and provisional good things that can be done is worth our praise: "Each of us is solitary; each of us dies alone: all right, that's a fate against which we can't struggle—but there is plenty in our condition which is not fate, and against which we are less than human unless we do struggle." Mr. Tate is far from being the stock literary intellectual which Mr. Snow's scientist thinks of. I am not sure that Mr. Tate is thinking of a scientist very different from the one the stock literary intellectual in Snow's book is thinking of.

I think Mr. Tate's view of the Romantic movement is over-simple too, and I think it is so because it would spoil the beautiful design of his poem about catastrophe if it were otherwise. Nevertheless, one wonders why Wordsworth is mentioned so seldom, when it was Wordsworth who saw so clearly the dangers of abstraction and mechanism when they dominate the ordinary imaginations of men. One wonders also why Whitehead's view that the Romantic movement was a revolt in behalf of value is never mentioned, never argued. With all their faults, some of which Mr. Tate analyzes so acutely, the Romantics were experimenting in opening up the dangers and possibilities of life once again.

There is also the significant absence of Freud from the volume. It is of course not surprising that this should be so. Psychology, especially the psychology of Freud, is the discipline which most nearly impinges on the sort of experience which the literary art is equipped to deal with. And psychoanalysis, as a practical matter, attempts to achieve only provisional gains, limited good things. It is therefore alien to the spirit of this beautiful book. Alongside this book should be placed *Civilization and Its Discontents*, which is a poem about the dangers

and possibilities of life. Its vision is open and incomplete.

I would not like to be accused of a "facile optimism" in resisting what I hear as the elegiac tone of this book. I think what Mr. Tate says about where we are going may be so; and I think it may be so for the reasons he so eloquently gives. But I think it may also not be so, and it now seems to me that my resistance to certain things in the criticism which I read when I got out of the Army was not only the result of my confusions of values, the lack of a coherent framework of belief. I think my resistance was also the result of a dim sense that there were things in this criticism I could not give my assent to. The beauty and power of this criticism depends on these things; they are the cause of its coherence. The book is a wonderful structure. But it is a structure in which I do not feel entirely at home.

Irvin Ehrenpreis

Recent Poetry

Hayden Carruth, *The Crow and the Heart (1946-1959)*. New York: The Macmillan Company. \$1.50.

Gregory Corso, *The Happy Birthday of Death*. New York: New Directions. \$1.20.

Robert Creeley, *A Form of Women*. New York: Jargon Books in association with Corinth Books. \$1.50.

Bruce Cutler, *The Year of the Green Wave*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press. Cloth, \$3.00; paper, \$2.00.

David Ferry, *On the Way to the Island*. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press. Cloth, \$3.00; paper, \$1.65.

Jean Garrigue, *A Water Walk by Villa d'Este*. New York: St. Martin's Press. \$2.95.

Ramon Guthrie, *Graffiti*. New York: The Macmillan Company. \$1.00.

Edwin Honig, *The Gazabos: Forty-one Poems*. New York: Clarke and Way. \$3.00.

Frank Kermode, *Wallace Stevens*. New York: Grove Press (Evergreen Pilot Books). \$1.25.

Christopher Logue, *Songs*. New York: McDowell, Obolensky. \$3.00.
Vassar Miller, *Wage War on Silence*. Middletown, Connecticut:
Wesleyan University Press. Cloth, \$3.00; paper, \$1.65.

Hyam Plutzik, *Apples from Shinar*. Middletown, Connecticut: Wes-
leyan University Press. Cloth, \$3.00; paper, \$1.65.

Who prepares the blurbs for books of poetry? Do publishers imagine that a man who is likely to read a line of verse nowadays will feel anything but a numbing chill as he learns that the author's work bears "the stigmata of magnificence" (Anon., on Miss V. Miller), or that he "has many of the virtues of Robinson" (Professor Richard Wilbur, on Mr. H. Plutzik), or that he "gets pure abstract poetry" (an indebted friend, on Mr. Corso)? Luckily, the contents bear no remote resemblance to the description. If Mr. Plutzik must be cast as someone else (he shouldn't, having a literary character of unusual and unforced originality), it would be Stevens, not Robinson. Miss Miller is remarkably free from stigmata (if they mean distinguishing characteristics) and is magnificent only in her aspirations. What Mr. Corso creates is pure something all right, but no more abstract than any scenic sonnet done for a graduate course in creative writing.

In fact, a common blurb could be composed for all the poets reviewed here: "This man does best when he distrusts his feelings and follows his second thoughts. His weakest work is his most impulsive, whether tied to an obsession with, or a repudiation of, sound effects, stanza forms, patterns of imagery, and other aspects of technique." In other words, the most readable of these writers are the most intelligent, those who make interesting, fresh reflections upon human nature or the sum of things.

Yet what is it nowadays that we want most in poetry, that we can get nowhere else except in films or music? It is not tragedy, I think, but high pathos, an intensity of response to significant experience and a revelation of the secret life. This combination of intensity, significance, and privacy is just what is being destroyed by the triumph, in America, of the domestic ideal, the romance of the open-air family.

To achieve such violence, extracted from the shocking exposure of hidden events, a poet must be ready to humiliate those who love him, to slap the mouths he feeds, to sacrifice his dignity while maintaining his skill. By exposing himself, he exposes us. Really, the single excuse for the rigor of recent verse forms ought to be the unrestraint of what they express. The best young poet may tell a reader, with the sharpest immediacy, what he might hesitate to tell a wife or psychoanalyst. This is perhaps why the finest new poems often seem connected with emotional disorders. Wit, epistemology, and piety are no more than our second choices, accepted when such intensity is not provided. Nevertheless, if the first aims are improper to his genius or his mood, the unpretentious author

may happily try charm or wisdom. Truly comical effects seem impossible to produce in these years; but fresh, free, ironical fantasy can be very attractive; or else there is the charm of disarming self-assertion — "This is all me, and you ought to like it." Or there is the virtue of hard, long thought.

Mr. Carruth reaches an awesome intensity of self-revelation in several poems in his "Asylum" sequence. Some of these convey the bewildering mixture of resignation and amusement, boredom and absurdity, humiliation and dignity felt by the non-psychotic patient contemplating his own case:

A larch,
Of graceful habit, makes its green display,
And there seems very little left to say.
The soiled and motley pigeons pass
Like tick and tock upon the grass.
The nurse who supervises shuffleboard
Is continually amazed,
Being young and pretty. The male attendants hoard
Their tedium and yet are poised
For anything. Up where the slates are pearlyed
In sunlight an arrow turns forever, seized
In our four winds, pointing across the world.

Mr. Carruth's "The Key" is a fine instance of a metaphor which blossoms unexpectedly but continuously and very movingly into implication upon implication, as the poet examines an old key which he has dug up in his garden and for which the lock no longer exists; he concludes,

The ground.
A garden, lasts, made bearable in love;
The indispensable sustenance of love.
A blush of substance petals us and keys,
And we also return at last to the garden
And are found again, or not. The lockless key
Seeks its acknowledgment from everyone,
From you who sit so quiet reading there,
From him whose peculiar motions make the poem.

But there is a difference between intensity revived and ecstasy either remembered or craved. A plain enumeration of objects which have excited the poet — or which ought to excite him — need not excite the reader. The poet who mistakes recall or want for rebirth substitutes a sense of striving for the glow of fulfillment or insight. Miss Garrigue can drench the reader with such quasi-

intensities as this plea to roses in late autumn:

Pierce me with spines that by your casquing cups . . .
We stay the summer soul.

If these were roses infused with historical, public, moral significance, the breathlessness might be justified: but they are flowers which arouse deep emotion in the poet for incommunicable reasons. Unfortunately, however clotted the vocabulary and syntax of a poem may be, mere denseness of expression will not provoke richness of response. So the reader can at best only watch Miss Garrigue writhe and take her word for it that the dying blossoms deserve the swoon. I find her fantasy more convincing, as in *Swiss Altitudes*, from which I quote the first two stanzas:

Traveling might be truly extraordinary
For the heart that would ever be dashed
In its expectations of royal fable,
Wonder, most monstered genius,
If on some Simplon Tunnel Express
One had as companions seriously faced
A pleasant sheep dressed up in shawl
And knitting from her own grey wool,
A goat with spectacles and spats
Reading a Latvian journal.

As it is, bolt upright in the less wandered land
Of the wonderland of four languages
When the fifth must be the language of eyes
Which is more than one might have with a bird
Singing in open impassioned Italian
Or a dense bear sputtering German,
Most remarkably the gentleman traveling for a firm
And the lady going to a station beyond Lausanne
Parley of Chillon and Leman
As we rock in the darkness and wait
In the pure diction of the French nation
For the next language of morning.

When an experience seems as thin as Miss Garrigue's roses, a poet is tempted to fatten it with much assonance and imagery. Such exclusive preoccupation with verbal texture and subtle conceits implies an unwillingness to deal in meanings. The poet acts as though his feelings and thoughts were of negligible

interest to others and he were therefore hugging them to himself. With these attitudes, he will find the riddle an attractive form, whether ornate or bare. If the reader is disappointed with what he ultimately discovers, the poet can at least reflect that the man had to work to discover it. And the reader of course often feels unwilling to admit that so much work could have accomplished nothing; so he bestows upon the riddle poem a sufficient measure of implications to justify his own effort.

In Mr. Creeley's poetry each line or image tends to be not an expansion, continuation, or illustration of the preceding but a reaction to or reflection upon it. The effect is like that of a series of ideograms. Instead of presenting us with observations and then drawing out their implications, showing their relation by transitional expressions and connectives, Mr. Creeley tends to list perceptions out of context, interspersed with notations of feelings provoked either by the items or by the act of listing them. Through the elimination of transitions and settings, he condenses his poems to such a degree that they become almost the opposite of Dr. Johnson's notion of poetry. Since the meaning of Mr. Creeley's perceptions must therefore depend upon an intuitive or *ad hoc* symbolism, his references are limited pretty much to his own basic, immediate roles or to the most obvious public events. Any reference more traditional or more subtle could not be conveyed by such shorthand. In these verses, consequently, he is almost always either lover or poet; and we can generally manage his meanings if we attach them to some primary aspect of sexual passion or literary creation. In "They Say," for instance, he watches his beloved combing her hair and notices how her strokes slow down as they come to the end. He reflects that he has taken this woman out of the routine world of gossip and sterility—the world of "they say"—into his own, that of the imagination. This in turn is a forest ranged by the poet, and to it belong the creatures of nature, the dog and the duck, associated with the hunting and shooting pastimes which represent the poet's chase after his own visions. Having joined these, his beloved has left, and cannot be seen by, the prosaic world:

Up and down
what falls
goes slower and slower
combing her hair.

She is the lovely stranger
who married the forest ranger,
the duck and the dog,
and never was seen again.

Of course, "she" can turn into the muse, captured by the poet, as well as the

poet's wife. And of course my analysis of method and specimen has been tedious. However, it seems the only way to demonstrate the advantages and defects of Mr. Creeley's method: he gives us the parts, and we assemble the poem. I find the result interesting but sharply limited in scope and oddly divorced from literary qualities: these poems do not invite re-reading for their language. Mr. Creeley's postures also trouble me. I distrust self-pity dressed as nobility, I distrust hatred or fear of women disguised as tenderness; and these are his preoccupations.

Yet if one turns from either riddles or richness to straightforward verses, the inner poverty of much recent work becomes still less tolerable. Mr. Carruth can publish lines so bathetic as these, contrasting pictures of war scenes with the comments of journalists writing about their horror:

The sight so raw

And unbelievable, of people blown apart
Was enough to numb us without that bark and whine.
We grew disconsolate.

Miss Garrigue can open an elegy,

The day was unbearably mild
When he went forth in his clothes.

At the same time, Miss Garrigue is an expert, gifted poet whose sees as she alone sees and speaks as she alone speaks. She may not discipline her talent or give it the best direction, but it is undeniably flourishing. Miss Miller, on the other hand, though admirably straightforward, uses a ready-made equipment of stale dialectic, standardized similes, and a language of interchangeable parts, at least in her religious poems. Echoing a memory of devout ecstasies, she writes devotional songs and sonnets as they have been written since the renaissance of the school of Donne. If an agnostic critic brought up on metaphysical lyrics should sympathize with her sounds, it would be thanks to the lack of religious elements in his own character. So it is not odd that Miss Miller should display her authentic virtue (such as it is) in those observations which do not depend upon Christian doctrine: either solemnly, for example, in some lines upon a woman about to die —

Uncaring how our chatter ebbs or flows,
She catches the first syllables of silence —

or else cheerfully, as in lines upon the mating of the almost-extinct whooping crane, "who still enjoys the weather / Despite his wingdom's wane":

He counts it bliss, not bother
That less than half a dozen
Make free to call him father
Or even claim him cousin.

This sort of wit, including what Addison called false wit and Coleridge called fancy, has a close hold on many poets today. These are writers who would like to surprise us but can do so only by the choice and juxtaposition of their images, not by the objects of their feelings or the nature of their thoughts. Here, for instance, is an example of refined expression behind which sits the mildest suggestion of an emotion or idea:

The infant rat, all head and stumble,
Stopped naked on the kitchen floor,
Shivering to its whiskers . . .

The poet, Edwin Honig, can neither kill nor adopt the animal, but throws it alive upon a rubbish heap; and whether it then escapes or is found by a scavenging bird, he need not feel culpable. Mr. Honig had no wish to rewrite Burns; nevertheless, if we recall what ingenuity and vigor of heart and mind Burns devoted to a similar occasion, we may wonder why, since Mr. Honig believed the episode called for a poem, he did not make more of it. Although, as with these poets generally, his light, shorter poems have a whimsical charm, this close attention to detail and comparative negligence of generalities in the longer, serious poems keep one from feeling deeply moved by Mr. Honig.

Mr. Guthrie, on the contrary, has no pretensions, and for his self-knowledge I thank him. He means to be coarse, lively, amusing, and independent; and most of his readers should find his poems genuinely entertaining. They tend to be a little too long or too obvious; the punch lines tend to sound heavy; the homespun self-assertion is sometimes less coarse than vulgar. But while the lines do not sing, they do bounce; and the fantasy is both spontaneous and exuberant.

Another, almost opposite sort of unpretentiousness belongs to Mr. Cutler. He is an earnest, careful poet, not very lively, impassioned, or interesting. Over his work are scattered the tokens of his generation. He affects words like "dindle" and "amplexities," lines like "Black roils in a norther's arc," imagery of spirals and of a single bright object flashing briefly in a dark setting. So he must be contemporary. Yet one infers that the character of the person who wrote the poems is remarkable — modest, brave, independent, better at cele-

bration than attack. His religious verse is neither forced nor precious, though his attempts at satire or aphoristic irony are ineffectual. Among his preoccupations are birds, Mexico, the color green, and the themes of death and birth. His little book is ill-served by a misleading manifesto of a preface for which we are obliged to the inventive powers of Professor Karl Shapiro. Among Mr. Cutler's characteristic and good poems is "The Black Sands of Conchalió":

Moro combers always rise to attack.
Waging wars of slow attrition, if four
fall on rock, four will take their place. A black

seagull holds up the vault of heaven, and for
a moment whoops the cadence as he breaks
and esses with the surf.

Pacific shore,
wilder surmise west of Darien, where wakes
cut by Esso tankers foul in oil and swill
that we transmute on typhoid-ridden lakes —

we stand as militant, deaf to the shrill
cree of gulls, incredulous, as combers when
they rise with lungs bursting for the kill.

Of Mr. Corso, his agents say that he has broken with "current verse conventions." This may well be true, though not in their intended sense. Nothing could be more public than Mr. Corso's tone; nothing less intense than his language; nothing so stale as his attitudes. Here is the sanity of unknowing youth; but instead of a self we find only a bundle of disconnected perceptions in a perpetual flux. Mr. Corso would recognize this description as an echo of Hume, because he is overpowered by the weight of his own book learning. His poems are, perhaps not always deliberately, of a remarkable allusiveness; and so far from being in any common denotation "pure," he is excessively dependent upon the work of earlier authors. He appears to think that by mimicking the gestures of D. H. Lawrence and W. C. Williams he may distract us from his roots in undergraduate anthologies and textbooks. His verses, however, tell us the truth. "Death's cruellest day!" is the opening line of an elegy. "In the park of God there are no children" is the last line of a poem about his jealousy of children. Death and infancy are indeed the two ends of his ribbon; for he seeks the privileges, the public attention of a child, so he may without reproach meditate upon the destruction of those who share the light which he believes should belong to him alone.

Mr. Logue, a no-longer-so-young English poet, has dazzling powers but too few themes to exercise his abundant energy, his admirable ear, and his freshness of language. In these poems if we are not denouncing British and human stupidity, we are praising some lady's sexual resources, examining Mr. Logue's own personality, or translating (brilliantly) the work of other poets. This is not the whole of his range but most of it. At his weakest he can produce "Song for Kathleen," a cryptic, rather Jungian ballad upon the hospitality of Miss Kathleen Raine. At his best he can make this version of a love poem by Neruda:

Snared by the dying light
You stand amidst the dusk's mauve spiral,
Which, as it rises, circles about you.

You do not speak. Neither do you move.
And off the flames you kept from noon
This small hour flinches. Now, and like light,

Various flowers fall on your dark blouse; and now,
Dark webs drift upwards from your heart until
The things you hoarded come into the world

Again, but changed. White villages feed off you.
Swung in an orbit of black on gold,
The sun's rich victim, you draw all

Possible flowers from that sun until it dies;
Moving your fingers through my hair you have become
The sleeping mistress of creation.

My favorites are Mr. Ferry and Mr. Plutzik. It might be said that Mr. Ferry's harpsichord plays a single air; but it is a wholly delightful air, and he knows how to vary the pedals and chords so that one welcomes each variation. It is about love and beauty: secure, wise love, tender but not too demanding, effortless but deserved; accessible beauty, awesome but beneficent, cheering and precise. In unmitigated, intelligent charm lies Mr. Ferry's appeal. He knows how to be spare and evocative at the same time, how to reveal his own character without condemning ours. He employs plain words and familiar images; yet his tone is so easy, his lines so graceful, his control so exquisite that one can hardly help singing along with him. The selection he has made from his work is sufficiently rigorous for all but a few of the poems in the book to be worth quoting; but I have kept myself to one, "A Farewell":

Let the day fall like light out of the eye.
Out of the ear let its music go. From the touch
Let the touching of air retire. Remain in the dark,
Dumbly remain in the dark. What will they know
Of you then, or want, when, then, in the dark you remain?

Knowledge began with the pressure of light on the eye,
And the ear spun out of thin air its airy tune.
Let no vein flutter or flicker to signal the blood's
All but imperceptible errand. Does the skin
Shudder or shiver at all at least conjunction?

Shrink, then, into your dark, be locked up in yourself,
Shadow of shadow in your nothing dark,
Oh be keep to yourself, be close, be moat, be wall
All dark. Hush. Hear hush. Vanish. Know nothing.
How then will the daylight knock at the lid in vain!

Though Mr. Plutzik ingratiates himself with us rather less elegantly than Mr. Ferry does, he too hardly attempts the high pathos for which I think we reserve our strongest praise. Out of meditation comes his passion; he seems the most intellectual of these poets, the most philosophical, the one most profoundly in touch with both history and science. Character interests him, as well as epistemology; and he can tell a story which is both true verse and convincing narrative. The most remarkable of his accomplishments is a reworking of the Hamlet myth into a weird, medieval version which evokes the darkest principles of human nature. But the other poems disclose an earnest, searching power of mind that is one of the rarest virtues of modern writing. "Trio for Two Voices and a Woodwind" is too long to quote; so I give "The Importance of Poetry, or the Coming Forth from Eternity into Time."

Beyond the image of the willow
There is a willow no man knows
Or watches with corruptible eyes.

Deep in a field where no man goes
Nor bird flies
The willow fronts an empty road.

The bird hovers in other skies:
World where only these wings exist

And elsewhere, alone, upon an abyss,
The man is marching down a road.

As the rays of the sun are drawn together
By a curved glass and rekindled to fire
So, to the poppies life and death,
So does desire
Draw them and bend them and bind them so,
So the noise of the wings can at least be heard
And the willow-image do grace to a bird
And the ghost on the roadway give them word
Not forever, only a day.

Finally, and with apologies to living poets, I should like to recommend a book about a dead one, one from whom Mr. Plutzik, among others, has learned something. Wallace Stevens has become so fashionable that few critics can boast of having published no study of his work. But very little of the commentary or criticism is useful. Easily the best book on Stevens — comprising five of the best essays anyone has written on him, as well as a careful bibliography — is the new, inexpensive paperback by the poet's champion in Britain, Frank Kermode. I think Professor Kermode underestimates *Harmonium* and overestimates not only the late poems but the prose essays. However, enough reverence, taste, and scholarship have gone into his book to make its shortcomings negligible. Professor Kermode writes with clarity and eloquence; little that he says is secondhand or obvious; no admirer of Stevens can afford to ignore him.

Joseph Frank

The Language of Art

E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion, A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*. Bollingen Series No. 35. Pantheon Books, N.Y., 1960. \$10.

The Bollingen series of lectures in the National Gallery of Art in Washington have already been responsible for some of the most important works in art and aesthetics to have appeared in recent years. Jacques Maritain's *Creative Art and Intuition*, Sir Kenneth Clark's *The Nude*, Etienne Gilson's *Painting*

and Reality — all have emerged as the product of invitations to participate in this series. Prof. E. H. Gombrich's *Art and Illusion* is the latest contribution to this illustrious roster, which sets a very high standard indeed; and it is no reflection on his extremely able work to say that it does not quite reach the level of its predecessors. Prof. Gombrich can hardly compete with Maritain's intimate familiarity and sympathy with the modern *avant-garde* sensibility; nor does he possess Sir Kenneth's historical penetration and stylistic brilliance, or Gilson's philosophical depth. But he does have a vast and detailed knowledge of the practice of art as a discipline, and a welcome curiosity about the possible relation of the most recent psychology to the problem of artistic representation. Indeed, the greatest merit of Prof. Gombrich's book is that he finally succeeds in making experimental psychology seem really helpful about art, rather than, as in the past, merely pretentiously irrelevant.

The great question to which Prof. Gombrich addresses himself is that of stylistic change. Why does art have a history? Why, in other words, are there so many differing ways of representing the world when all men presumably possess the same ocular apparatus? This apparently naive question, which disconcertingly gets to the heart of the matter, has usually been answered in terms of cultural history — of what the Germans, who have given most attention to this problems, call *Geistesgeschichte*. The great modern masters of art history — Riegl, Dvorak, Worringer — tended to explain shifts in style by refined versions of the Hegelian idea of *Zeitgeist*. All manifestations of a culture were somehow linked together; and art-styles were seen as one part of a complex whose ultimate explanation was located in the evolution of racial, religious or metaphysical categories (a Marxist would of course locate the explanation in economic categories.)

Prof. Gombrich, who left his native Vienna for England as a refugee, and who is now head of the Warburg Institute in London, has an understandable antipathy to such doctrines; their misuse by Spengler and Nazi-influenced writers in his own field are still all too fresh in his memory. "By inculcating the habit of talking in terms of 'collectives,' or 'mankind,' 'races,' or 'ages,' [they] weaken resistance to totalitarian habits of mind." Like K. R. Popper, whose influence on his thought he gratefully acknowledges, Prof. Gombrich is a determined opponent of all such historical "mythologies." And one of the purposes of his own book is to substitute a more scientific, psychological explanation for "some grandiose scheme of evolution" of the type advocated by his predecessors.

So far as this intention forms the polemical thread of Prof. Gombrich's discourse, however, he seems to me to misunderstand his own point of view. In reality, he is arguing at cross-purposes with his opponents — as he admits in a tell-tale sentence in his last chapter. "The purpose of this book"

he writes, "is to explain why art has a history, not why its history developed in one direction rather than another," But if this is true, then Prof. Gombrich is not offering any alternative to the theories he rejects. For the problem they attempted to solve was precisely this latter one of the *direction* of stylistic change, not the sheer fact of change itself. The psychology of perception, as Prof. Gombrich amply demonstrates, can illuminate the fact of change because it proves that "reality" may be "read" in many different ways; but it offers no answer to the question of why certain civilizations preferred certain "readings" of visual experience. And when Prof. Gombrich addresses himself directly to this latter problem, he is forced (though in an evasive and back-handed way) to fall back on the very type of explanation that he theoretically deplores.

A good example is provided by Prof. Gombrich's reflections on the "Greek miracle," i.e., the achievement of life-like representation in Greek sculpture and vase-painting after centuries of Egyptian and Mesopotamian immobility. He rejects all "spurious explanations" of this development based on vague notions of "the evolution of mankind" or "the spirit of the Greeks." Instead, he appeals to the far more "intelligible" idea of the relation of function and form. "May not the conceptual, diagrammatic character of Egyptian images which has so often been described have as much to do with the function of these images as with the hypothetical 'mentality' of the Egyptian?" So far so good: but what is this function? The Egyptian sculptor, Prof. Gombrich writes, "could lay claim to the famous appellation of 'one who keeps alive.' His images weave a spell to enforce eternity. . . . Only the complete embodiment of the typical in its most lasting and changeless form could assure the *magic validity* of these pictographs for the 'watcher' who could here see both his past and his eternal future removed from the flux of time." [Italics added.]

One can only wonder at the failure of Prof. Gombrich to realize that he is here defining "function" in terms of the "hypothetical mentality" of the Egyptian—or rather, in terms of Egyptian religion. And his reference to the "magic validity" of the Egyptian image surely refers to a stage in the "evolution of mankind," especially since Prof. Gombrich attributes the development of Greek art to the rise of the idea of "fiction," i.e., a divorce between the image and the "truth" of what it represents. The Greek relation to the image was no longer magical, and thus the Greek artist had a freedom to experiment previously unknown in the history of culture. Prof. Gombrich himself concedes that "the story of the gradual emancipation of conscious fiction from myth and moral parable . . . could not be treated in isolation from the rise of critical reason in Greek culture." And so here we return to the *Zeitgeist* again, rising like a phoenix from the ashes in which Prof. Gombrich's "science" was supposed to immolate it forever!

All this should be enough to prove that the course of intellectual history

cannot be reversed, and that it is impossible to reject the insights of historicism — no matter how susceptible they may be to perversion, or how tautological they may become if not carefully handled. After all, we do not reject medicine because of the horrible experiments carried on in Hitler's concentration camps to determine the threshold of life; nor experimental psychology itself because it comes in very handy for brainwashing.

It would be totally unfair, however, to give the impression that the bulk of Prof. Gombrich's book is taken up with this unsuccessful polemic. Quite the contrary is the case. The burden of his massive erudition, which he carries with commendable lightness, is brought to bear on the problem of imitation and illusion; it is here that he makes his most significant and valuable contribution. Modern art has rejected the whole realm of representation, illusion or *mimesis* (whatever we wish to call it) as of no interest and, indeed, as positively unesthetic. But this view, Prof. Gombrich argues very convincingly, is based on a false psychology; the whole notion of "representation" as a passive registering of visual impressions is nonsense. His thesis, in brief, is that the art of representation does not involve reproduction as much as translation. It is based on finding a set of equivalents whose relationship to each other becomes a medium through which the artist filters what we call "reality."

"Everything points to the conclusion," he writes, "that the phrase 'the language of art' is more than a loose metaphor, that even to describe the visible world in images we need a developed system of schemata. . . . All art originates in the human mind, in our reactions to the world rather than in the visible world itself, and it is precisely because all art is 'conceptual' that all representations are recognizable by their style." This conclusion, which of course has been a commonplace of Idealist aesthetics for almost a century (Hegel rejected the idea of art as imitation), is now in line with the modern psychology of perception and vision; for this latter stresses the role of interpretation and active collaboration on the part of the mind in the process of "seeing." We "read" visual clues largely in terms of what we have come to expect, in terms of our "mental set," just as we "hear" garbled words in terms of the language with which we are familiar. Each artist who creates a new set of such terms, and who trains us to read "reality" in a different way, is thus literally increasing the richness of our knowledge of the world. This explains the enthusiasm, somewhat baffling in our own day, of such writers as Pliny and Vasari over the first triumphs of illusion in art; and also the familiar but puzzling phenomenon that, after immersing ourselves in the work of a particular artist or style, we begin to find, as Oscar Wilde put it, that nature imitates art.

It is from this point of view that Prof. Gombrich gives us a fascinating, richly-documented and frequently amusing discussion of the role of stereotype, convention and tradition in the formation of styles. Everywhere he demon-

strates the tenacity of schemata handed down through generations of drawing manuals, and employed even by such advocates of back-to-nature painting as Constable. Nor is it only the artist for whom schemata are important; they are also the key to what Prof. Gombrich calls "the beholder's share." Perception is based on expectation, and the tacit collaboration between the artist and his audience is in this respect of first importance. The creation of illusion cannot be accomplished unless the beholder "projects" into the picture what the artist has only hinted at in terms of a convention within which the picture has to be "read." One of the constantly recurring fallacies of art criticism is to confuse each successive set of such conventions with "nature," and to blur the distinction between literal imitation and the invention of new equivalences. Strictly speaking, from Prof. Gombrich's point of view, there is no such thing as "imitation" at all. From this unusual and, so far as my knowledge goes, original position, he rejects the whole Platonic criticism of art developed in *The Republic*.

Most of Prof. Gombrich's book is devoted to exploring the fine points of this "language" of art with a wealth of illustrations from the most diverse fields — including the delightful work of the father of the comic strip, Rudolphe Töpffer. Indeed, so many problems are raised in passing that it is impossible to do more here than touch on a few of the most important. One such is the idea that art took its root in the process of "projection," i.e., the "reading" of rocks, cloud formations and other natural phenomena in terms of familiar shapes. This was suggested in the Renaissance by Leon Battista Alberti (and indirectly by Leonardo); it links up, as Prof. Gombrich points out, with the psychological technique of the Rorschach test. Another interesting idea deals with the rise of modern art. Prof. Gombrich attributes this, curiously enough, to a clash between the pursuit of perfect illusion and the inherent ambiguity of all vision. Identical shapes on a plane, for example, will seem to vary in size as a result of our knowledge of the size-distance relationship; and this "ambiguity of the canvas destroys the artist's control over his elements. I believe this is the real explanation for the revulsion against illusionism that set in at the very time when its means were perfected. They were found to be inartistic, they militated against visual harmonies."

This is suggestive if not very convincing. One suspects that the invention of the camera had more to do with the revolt against illusionism than the vagaries of "natural" sight used by Prof. Gombrich to illustrate his contention. Here Prof. Gombrich actually sticks to psychology, without smuggling in the *Zeitgeist*, in trying to explain the direction of stylistic change; and the weakness of his explanation — the obvious disparity between imputed cause and known effect — is all too glaring. More persuasive is his contention that modern abstract art, which uses colors and forms to evoke feelings rather than images,

still faces the old problem of equivalences in a new way. "Can the world of the mind, of the dream, be explored by experiments that result in accepted conventions as was the world of the waking eye?"

Psychology shows that there is an astonishing amount of agreement among people asked to classify apparently meaningless reactions to things within a limited set of alternatives—for example, whether a color is ping or pong. This suggests that some sort of conventions *can* be established in abstract art, especially within the controlling context of the work of any individual artist. The ultimate question, however, is whether forms and colors can move us as directly and intensely as music, or compete with the richness and complexity of words in expressing the world of the mind. If not, as seems to be the case, then one can only conclude—though Prof. Gombrich does not do so himself—that abstract art has wandered up a blind (though highly decorative) alley in abandoning any connection with the waking eye.

In the light of Prof. Gombrich's sniping at "grandiose" theories of stylistic change, it is amusing to see how often he acknowledges the concurrence of his own conclusions with those of André Malraux. On the appearance of Malraux's *Voices of Silence*, Prof. Gombrich wrote a damning review in which, with a surprising lack of logic, he accused Malraux of being both an ignoramus and a plagiarist of scholarly sources at the same time. Nonetheless Prof. Gombrich, though somewhat grudgingly, now concedes that his own ideas on the tenacity and importance of convention, tradition and schemata were anticipated by Malraux, "Malraux knows" he writes, "that art is born of art, not of nature." Indeed, what Prof. Gombrich has really done is to give a psychological explanation for the grip of stylistic tradition in art history. This provides an indispensable supplement to Malraux's emphasis on the creativity of the great genius, whose function consists precisely in breaking this grip and inventing a new schema.

Far from being opposed, the work of the two writers thus dovetails very neatly; and the same is true of an earlier writer like Riegl whom Prof. Gombrich sets out specifically to refute. There is no essential contradiction between Prof. Gombrich's account of vision as a selective, purposive process and Riegl's famous idea of *Kunstwollen*, i.e., the idea that styles are not a mere mechanical product of a certain level of technical skill but the result of a different way of "seeing" the world in terms of a cultural tradition. In fact, Prof. Gombrich has now given this theory an important grounding in scientific psychology; he has not by any means replaced it, as he appears to believe. For while we must certainly discard all of Riegl's racial and biological explanations for the rise and alternation of such traditions, it is only by a more sober, exact and judicious analysis of cultural "totalities" that we can hope to come closer to answering the questions that he raised.

Frank Baldanza

Novels from Britain

J. R. Ackerley. *We Think the World of You*. London: Bodley Head. 12s6d.

Sylvia Ashton-Warner. *Incense to Idols*. New York: Simon and Schuster. \$3.95.

William Golding. *Free Fall*. New York: Harcourt Brace. \$3.95.

Colin MacInnes. *Absolute Beginners*. New York: Macmillian. \$3.75.

Philip O'Connor. *Steiner's Tour*. Paris: Olympia. n.f.15,00.

Anthony Powell. *Casanova's Chinese Restaurant*. New York: Little, Brown. \$4.00.

David Storey. *Flight Into Camden*. London: Longmans. 16s.

Honor Tracy. *A Number of Things*. New York: Random House. \$3.95.

The current British novel shows a healthy variety of forms and approaches which defies any efforts at generalization from the point of view of technique. In regard to content, even though none of the books considered here were written in anger, a preoccupation with the social contrasts of class structure is still strong. We might attribute this preoccupation to the "angry young men," but then there are the critics like Virginia Woolf who maintain that social contrasts have been the distinguishing feature of the English novel throughout its history. While her kind of critic often uses this remark as an excuse to belabor the English novel for having dawdled in the shallows while the Russians and the French were plumbing the depths, that complaint no longer holds. Ford, James, Conrad, Joyce, and others grafted the continental techniques onto the native product (we remember someone's saying *The Good Soldier* is the greatest French novel in the English language) and there is strong evidence in Ackerley, Powell, and Golding that these graftings have flourished on English soil.

The first impression one draws from J. R. Ackerley's *We Think the World of You* is of stark modesty of intention. The book is a bare analysis of the emotional tensions between Frank Barnes, the imprisoned Johnny Burney, Johnny's family, and Johnny's dog, Evie. But the second impression — especially to one like myself who dislikes most pets and actively hates all dogs — is one of absolute novelty; Mr. Ackerley has elevated Evie to the level of an authentic character in the novel, at the same time avoiding the most obvious pitfalls of narrations which deal with animals. He posits no intelligence or character for Evie beyond ordinary credence; he discusses Evie's maltreatment

without the maudlin hysterics that typify most callers to the R. S. P. C. A.; and he does not subordinate the human beings to the animal. Such a work as Kafka's "Investigations of a Dog" is admittedly meant to capitalize solely on the dog's point of view; Thomas Mann, however, in "A Man and His Dog" maintains an exact balance between animal and human that still gives the dog the advantage simply because of the effort at maintaining that balance. Mr. Ackerley has been able to perform this feat by keeping attention relentlessly focused on the aspect of love that is most salient to his misogynist narrator—the fierce cruelty of possessiveness. Frank is a bespectacled, aging civil servant whose right to a possessive love for Johnny is countered by the latter's wife Megan; and whose right to Evie is challenged on all sides—by Johnny, Megan, Millie (Johnny's mother), and Tom Winder (Millie's fourth husband).

One of the predominant ironies of the situation is that Frank's defeat results directly from his exercise of all the civilized virtues—reason, truthfulness, altruism, and neatness. In dealing with working-class people, these virtues founder in the intense atmosphere of self-seeking, petty gain, and inane jealousy that are as thick and stifling as the hot, damp air in Millie's kitchen. But despite the economical asperity with which he treats social contrasts, Mr. Ackerley is more interested in the broad irony of Frank's pyrrhic victory over the Burneys and the Winders, since he wants Evie as a kind of extension of the inaccessible and evasive Johnny. When he eventually gains her (largely because she turns out to be barren and thus economically useless), her fiercely uncompromising love drives away all Frank's old friends and isolates him completely.

In a recent lecture at the University of California, Pamela Hansford-Johnson maintained that the quality of jealousy in Proust is clearly not heterosexual since it is too hysterically autonomous—*willed* for its own sake. Although she leaves vast areas of psychological motivation unexplored, Miss Hansford-Johnson has a point, and one that applies to Frank Barnes in this novel. His assumptions about the possessiveness of love may be a bit *outré*, but it is the incisiveness and clarity with which these assumptions are presented that make the experience a memorable one to the reader; and to that degree it necessarily conditions his view of the entire character of love. It is certainly an astonishing extension of ordinary novelistic conventions that makes the emotions of a dog one of the profoundly ironic facets of the situation.

Mr. Ackerley's book accomplishes its modest but novel aim with that absolute economy of means which is open only to the writer who has implicit confidence in the intelligence and sureness of his reader's response; he is able to go right to the point without talking the reader to death.

Having said this, we go right on to Anthony Powell's *Casanova's Chinese Restaurant* which has intelligence to burn, but which makes its points with

an irritating explicitness of statement. The contrast between the two books can best be seen in the treatment of the titles. The phrase of Mr. Ackerley's title appears fourteen times in the narration, each time with a slightly different ironic twist, but nowhere is it pointed out for its own sake, whereas Mr. Powell nearly lectures the reader about the ironies inherent in the name of the restaurant.

Since this is the fifth volume in the chronicle *The Music of Time*, it should perhaps not be judged as a separate work (only in advertising offices does anyone imagine that one volume from a tetralogy can be read all by itself). Large swatches of time are taken up with the necessary household tasks of identifying members of the huge cast, reviewing their lives since we saw them last, and carrying them forward their one or two inches in the present. The result is a broad, tapestry-like view of actors, musicians, novelists, critics, dancers, art experts, and aristocrats in England of the mid-thirties. The fact that Mr. Powell uses a point-of-view narrator does not do much to sharpen the effects, because Nick Jenkins simply serves as a conversational clearing-house, without much perceptible character of his own. For example, the suicide of Maclintock near the end of the book is brought home to the reader only because Moreland, Maclintock's closest friend, asks Jenkins to accompany him on two visits to Maclintock.

Much of the book has the quality of good gossip, which can be entertaining and may be very mildly philosophical (especially about marriage); despite its share of wit, aesthetic chit-chat, and an aphorism or two, it lacks definition, perspective, and solidity. Mr. Powell's command of painting and music appears encyclopedic, and his knowledge of the upper reaches of English society is exhaustive; but the question is what he does with these materials. On the whole, he concludes that "in the end most things in life—perhaps all things—turn out to be appropriate." There is this kind of complacency about the work that renders invalid most of the critical comparisons with Proust; while Nick Jenkins may find certain marriages and certain deaths to be curious and interesting, they are nevertheless appropriate. What one misses is the sense of shock and dislocation—the freshness of newly perceived reality—which is the hallmark of an art that only *then* goes on to reconcile the reader to the appropriateness of the new development.

Almost providentially, William Golding shows us in *Free Fall* the kind of freshness of representation that is wanted. "Reality" for Golding (and necessarily for his reader) is a madly jumbled chaos in which time, motive, sequence, and cause are as violently juxtaposed as the personal histories of the inhabitants of one of Dante's circles in the Inferno. Sammy Mountjoy, a prisoner in a Nazi camp, reviews his life in order to find the precise moment in which he was expelled from the paradise of innocence, in which he lost

his freedom. The hint of a physical descent without a parachute in the title is indicative of the speed and chaos with which he views experience; as he shouts at one point, "If I could only take this world for granted!"

Chapter by chapter he unreels violent, strange, compelling experiences—chronologically when convenient, but also linked by a philosophico-poetic ordering that relishes long leaps in time in order to cement strong moral associations.

Sammy is surrounded by unconscious, as well as dedicated, tutors. Evie (whose name is no accident) first leads him from the slums to school where he encounters Rowena Pringle, a sexually frustrated Bible teacher, and Nick Shales, the science master who has made the arbitrary leap into a calmly ordered rational universe. Between the hysterical presentation of the Hebrew mystery and the measured explanations of the facts of physics, these two teachers symbolically represent the currents of their age and the two versions of reality between which Sammy finds himself torn. A school companion involves him in a wild bet about urinating on the altar; this leads to his adoption by the severely repressed Fr. Watts-Watt.

The climax of Sammy's awareness comes under another spinster, a drawing teacher, when he becomes conscious of his desire for Beatrice, a student model (whose name is no accident either). This awareness coincides with the dismissal of a French teacher and a Rugby coach who have re-enacted *The Fall In The Garden* in the boiler room at dinner hour. Now Philip O'Connor (whom we shall turn to shortly) assures us from his advanced post that "love" is a word now used only by homosexuals and lesbians, although sex is still discussed sometimes in the suburbs. But it is in the treatment of this dangerously trite subject that Golding's skill as a writer is demonstrated surely and powerfully. The scenes with Beatrice are memorably real because they are so shockingly fresh in approach, but deeply appropriate in conclusion.

Mr. Golding is especially adept at representing the occurrence of physical action in that clean way developed by Conrad, Ford, and Hemingway—a total absence of any cliché preconception, and a straightforward immersion in the precise personal impressions of the protagonists as the action unrolls. Even when his hero is sitting on a bicycle waiting for a traffic light to change, the "action" is as memorable as many a lesser author's shipwreck. It goes without saying that childhood excursions into forbidden gardens and fog-bound airports are rendered in terrifying terms.

The finest effect of all, certainly, is Mr. Golding's use of symbolism—which will engage many an academic cataloguer before long. Imbedded in the narration half-buried, like the rocks in a Japanese garden, is a systematic train of references to gardens, punishing angels, falls from innocence, and loss of freedom. Almost heavily philosophical and intensely poetical, this is

a novel for those who like their meat thick and rare.

At the opposite pole, technically, David Storey's *Flight Into Camden* is entirely bald of the clever manipulation and the poetic overtones that are the legacy of the "experimental" novel. His highly traditional approach has many accidental resemblances to D. H. Lawrence—the collier father, the feminine narrator, and the stifling family ties; in fact, Mr. Storey's glancing allusion to a poem of Lawrence's shows that he is conscious of his predecessor. But the resemblances are entirely superficial. Mr. Storey is not a preacher, and he maintains a surgical objectivity about values that makes the reading disturbingly like facing the moral dilemmas oneself, rather than hearing a sermon about them, as one often feels with Lawrence.

On the one hand, there is the stolid elder generation, a collier and his wife, who go along bluntly and blindly on the old ways. On the other hand, there are Alec, Michael, and Margaret Thorpe, who have been given the mixed blessings of education and leisure. Alec simply lights out after his marriage; Michael fights his parents on the surface, but eventually settles down to a domestic somnolence that meets their approval. Margaret, by contrast, takes Michael's apparent rebellion to heart and, with his immediate disapproval, takes up with Gerald Haworth, a married man.

As a consequence of the lovers' flight to London, which angers and sickens Margaret's bewildered parents, it is obvious to a much more intense degree than it was with Michael that Margaret's revolt against the stultifying code of her parents turns out in the long run to be a partial confirmation of that code. But it is equally obvious that "long runs" never can and never will interest youth.

Mr. Storey has something like Mr. Ackerley's confidence in his reader's perceptions; the effects are subtly managed and the reader must piece together various hints for himself. When a resounding crisis does occur (such as the father's visit to London to bring back his erring daughter), the emotional tension is high.

Most typically, Mr. Storey gives the reader, through Margaret's consciousness, all the raw materials necessary to make value judgments; but the reader goes along with Margaret's infatuation, and when she is betrayed, the reader feels momentarily betrayed by the author. On paging back through the volume, however, he finds all the potentialities of the situation clearly spelled out time after time. Thus he is brought to reduplicate in his reading the kind of remorse Margaret experienced in reality.

In some ways, this is a dolorous book; it opens with a family funeral which is the occasion for a squabble; a succeeding wedding is marred by another disagreement; it is unremitting in its view of human suffering. In a sense, it has the effect of later Hardy, but without any of the lushly romantic trap-

pings. It is a book of high quality.

The same kind of social sweep observable in the other volumes is presented by two novels that view "the scene" from across the tracks. The narrators of Philip O'Connor's *Steiner's Tour* and Colin MacInnes's *Absolute Beginners* are habitués of espresso cafes and jazz clubs who wander, off and on, into plusher purlieus.

Steiner undertakes his tour of London Bohemia to collect material for a series of hypocritically uplifting articles on the lower classes, to be ghost-written for Lord Simpson, a popular Sunday supplement journalist. But the reader sees none of it, for he is caught in Steiner's psychic treadmill as the anguished youth tries to pin down his shifting identity. In effect, the book is a long monologue addressed to "Sir," a protean deity who runs the gamut from a paternal tribal autocrat to a made-up Existentialist joke; by means of a persistent metaphor, it also appears that schizoid Steiner considers himself to be a book in the process of being written by Sir. The reader, caught listening in on this intensely poetic—but often garrulous, opaque, and tiresomely abstract—monologue, is treated to a typically "beat" kind of irrelevance and irreverence. For example, the reader follows the narrator on his long way to work, only to be bawled out later on for having followed the wrong man and having left the narrator standing a half hour in the rain! The style is a lively pastiche of the most varied elements, including a few passages in a kind of double-writing: if the reader omits letters in parentheses, the entire passage takes on a second or third punning meaning.

Mr. MacInnes's "absolute beginner" is an impressively moral teenager who would be a bit more marvelous than he truly is if he did not bear such obvious resemblances to J. D. Salinger's Holden Caulfield. The major difference is that the Beginner, as he spins in and out of the "Napoli" slum area on his Vespa, has a more articulate sense of social purpose and a personal commitment to relieving racial tensions. Although he is a producer of pornographic photos, and numbers countless shady characters among his friends, he draws a clear line between himself and Wizard, who decides to become a pimp. He is one of the firmly incorruptible who draw strength from immersion in evil.

While the novel proceeds rather aimlessly at times toward the race riots that climax the Beginner's evaluation of London types, the reader is willing to accept the picaresque incidents for their social inclusiveness. The style, too, is reminiscent of Salinger, although it has its own peculiar color, and for those who enjoy figuring out contextual definitions of the vernacular, the language is full of delight.

In contrast with Steiner, the Beginner has no problems of identity; he means, very consciously, to formulate a credo and an apologia for the contemporary London teenager. In his relations with his mother, who has an

unfortunate penchant for her boarders; with his girl Suze, who has an equally unfortunate penchant for Negroes and wealthy homosexuals; and with his dying, willless father, he always shows a refreshingly lively moral response. In conclusion, the volume recalls such works as Gay's "Beggar's Opera" and Burns's "Jolly Beggars" in all except this moral aim.

It is a relief to step outside the slums and into the sunny nonsense of Honor Tracy's *A Number of Things*. Henry Lamb, the journalist narrator, is sent to the Caribbean by a liberal journal on the misconception that he has turned out a fashionably compassionate and sympathetic homosexual novel; once there, London critics are awakened to the basically satiric intent of the book, and Henry is abandoned to his own devices. Since he is a wholesomely adjusted observer set down in the mad, disoriented world that we first encountered in early Waugh, the results are hilarious. The major butt of satire is the "bungaloïd" do-gooders, the Welfare State equivalent of colonial missionaries, although few current types escape notice. Henry gains his revenge by bringing a vulgar local girl to an embassy luncheon; the outcome is classically simple and predictable, if the reader can pause in his laughter long enough to draw a rational breath—but that is hardly likely.

It is difficult to reconcile the enthusiastic praise given by discerning reviewers to Sylvia Ashton-Warner's first novel, *Spinster*, with her performance in *Incense to Idols* (Simon and Schuster). The book reflects real intelligence and sensitivity here and there, even though it is for the most part incredibly gauche—and badly punctuated. For one thing, the author has chosen to render the entire narration in Germaine de Beauvais's stream of consciousness, addressed, for some unknown reason, to the minister whom she passionately craves, but who resists her hitherto atomic powers of sexual attraction (the figure is the author's).

Thus in scenes between Germaine and the Rev. Mr. Guymer, she is committed to sentences like these:

You pull up a chair near me and lift a prosaic foot upon it in your own characteristic way. You place an elbow on the knee and your chin in the hand and study me with concentration. Then your other hand reaches and cups my chin and you examine every feature; your eyes gathering them all up like a shepherd checking his sheep. 'Why,' you ask quietly at length, 'did you ever come to church in the first place?'

"Why," asks the reader, "did you ever saddle yourself with such a cumbersome device?" The artificialities of language are rampant enough without asking readers to accept the gratuitous awkwardness of having the narrator tell her audience what the very audience did and said. In addition, the strictness with which the author adheres to stream of consciousness requires her to render all the physical details thus:

I am drying my hair on the hearth rug by the fire and listening to the G Flat in mind, and thinking about techniques. I am in the glorious indigo of the Chinese gown, luxury-loomed and fashion-fresh, a spectacular garment amounting to a way of life, making every moment spectacularly beautiful but where was I . . . don't let me wander. Ooh yes Hong Kong slippers and all since I'm believing without any evidence whatever that someone will come. How unlikely to be alone on a Saturday night.

This, and more, transpires between a knock on the door and the entry of the visitor.

In short, Germaine is a marriage-busting *femme fatale*, a sophisticated Parisian pianist who has come to New Zealand to study with an exiled master. She works her wiles (Strontium 90 perfume, ballistic lip-stick, rocket cocktails to get her into orbit, and a radio-active line about her clothes) on all the middle-aged men within missile range.

The author's inflexible adherence to awkward conventions of narration is paralleled by the dubious melodrama of the action. To be sure, some conductors do die on the podium, and fall from the stage baton in hand, but do the soloist-wife and the orchestra continue playing—as a tribute—with only the slightest of pauses? Tornadoes may hurl trees through church windows at the very climax of an anguished minister's poetic farewell sermon, but then does his frustrated admirer ever commit suicide on the altar with a piece of the window glass as she gazes at an apposite passage from *Job*?

Richard Lyons

A High E.Q.

Rabbit, Run, by John Updike. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1960. \$4.00.

Rabbit, Run is a poetic novel, but with certain exceptions it is not poetic prose. It is poetic in that like a good poem it cannot be paraphrased or summarized in any way that will fully enough suggest what it is. Its meaning is in its form. Nevertheless, I want to talk about the book. Sometimes one wants to talk about a thing that cannot be discussed more than he does about one that can. I am that way about this book.

Rabbit Angstrom, the hero of *Rabbit Run* has been called a "disjointed simpleton" and a "hollow, spineless" character. He is not, although a summary

of the events of the novel would lead one to think so. If one were to look for a literary cousin to Rabbit Angstrom, he would go to what appears on the surface to be the most unlikely of places—the fiction of J. D. Salinger. If Rabbit is like anyone else he is like Seymour Glass in "Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters." There is, of course, a difference, but it is not in their nervous systems; it is in their respective intelligences and in their abilities at verbal analysis of their emotional responses to experience. Seymour's intelligence enables him to know what is happening inside himself. Rabbit experiences a personal life, a happiness, but he cannot identify it to himself or to others with words. Seymour can say, "I suspect people of plotting to make me happy." Rabbit, had he Seymour's capacity for introspection, could say the same thing. But he hasn't the vocabulary with which to externalize the emotional tinglings which vibrate through his nervous system. The nervous system is as illiterate as the brain is insensitive; words (art) are the medium of exchange between feeling and knowing, but only for the mind. If nervous systems, like brains, could be measured for their appropriate quotient, Rabbit would have a high E.Q. (emotion quotient). Since in Rabbit it is his nervous system and not his mind that is highly developed, he suffers because he cannot communicate what he feels, sometimes even to himself. While this situation is true of several of Salinger's characters, they all know who they are and what they are. With Rabbit, there is no one who knows him, not even, as an objectively conscious entity, himself. The one possible exception is the Reverend Mr. Eccles, the only one who feels that Rabbit is worth "saving." And yet it is not Rabbit but Eccles who is the lost character in this novel, a novel too, in which there is no one without pathos at one time or another, as, for example, Rabbit's wife, whose particularly tragic scene near the end is the artistic apex of the book.

Rabbit, with his inarticulateness (and he is inarticulate only because, unlike the rest of the characters, he has something to say), lives always in the present. This aspect governs the structural style. The book is written, except for one necessary transitional paragraph, in the present tense so that the whole experience of the book is always in the present. Rabbit is life, and life is always now. Tomorrow hasn't come yet; yesterday we remember, as Rabbit does. But we are actively conscious, alive only at this moment. When Rabbit speaks at such moments of greatest intensity, his voice says commonplace banalities. Others are unconscious of what he feels or that he feels. It is at such moments that people respond in the wrong way, break his sense of beatitude, a cleavage which produces further negative reactions in Rabbit by which others know him. Eccles, however, catches faint glimpses of Rabbit's essence, and it is he who calls him a mystic. The mystical experience is always in the present tense.

It is the curse of the mystic that his joy, which is not transferable, must be

shared. To the creative artist there are escapes sometimes. For Rabbit there is no escape except through the act of love or through a delicately balanced sense of successful physical expression. From his past Rabbit remembers such an experience. It came during a non-conference basketball game during which everyone was relaxed and played the game for pure pleasure and Rabbit felt a complete control of his muscles. The game was played without reference to anything outside its own definition, a released, self-contained moment in time. During the period of the novel Rabbit communicates fully with another only once when he first makes love with Ruth and they share in touch what they can never share in words. In the world's mouth this desire for communion comes out as dirty lust. It is stained. It is such staining conversation among several people in a cheap tavern that goads Rabbit into his one lustful, loveless performance, also with Ruth.

That delicate emotional mechanism in Rabbit is much the same quality which Eccles searches for. Eccles, trained in the formalistic ritual of organized religious conscription, uses the term Grace. Grace is akin to mysticism (contrary to Rabbit, Eccles' background and training have prepared him, theoretically, to find it, but not to let himself be found by Grace, which cannot be pursued). What are in Rabbit selfish, physical indulgences become when translated into an acceptable traditional vocabulary respectable and transcendent expressions of saints who have touched God in the night. Rabbit, constructed of extrasensory but illiterate emotions and trying to maneuver through the world of cold intellect, continually crashes into negative responses from others. Yet people, life still excite him. He is delighted with Ruth when first they meet. That she is an itinerant prostitute is irrelevant to her humanity. She is not attractive. Like a Salinger character, Rabbit is receptive to some inner quality to which he responds without having to ask himself why. External circumstances are not important. He has been told that she is fat. He tries to suggest that she is not or that it doesn't matter. "He's talking just for happiness, but something he says makes her tense up." The tension turns out not to be bad at the time, but it is typical of the failure of emotional contact which must be translated into words to reach. He wakes up Sunday morning after sleeping with Ruth, sees people going to church. "The thought of these people having the bold idea of leaving their homes to come and pray pleases and reassures Rabbit, and moves him to close his own eyes and bow his head with a movement so tiny Ruth won't notice." His instinct is right, we see, from her response to his comment on the congregation. "'Sunday morning,' she says, 'I could throw up every Sunday.'" Nevertheless he tries to tell her that he believes. He cannot say quite that he believes in being alive, in living and in knowing it fully. Having no other word, he accepts Ruth's suggestion of "God."

This word he feels is not the right word, for it merely replaces one vagueness

with another. To give some concrete dimension to this vagueness has been Mr. Updike's problem to solve. It is not an easy task, and he has chosen to make it more difficult. To be affirmative, to believe in life is at present, I gather, unpopular. To try to project this belief through an inarticulate athlete instead of through a highly articulate mystic, such as Seymour Glass, is to compound the difficulty. Modern savants have misunderstood Salinger. It is certain they will misunderstand Updike. Critics appear unable at times to recognize life in fiction, life without a program or a motto, without a tub-thumping manifesto for future proselytizing. Such readers flatten moments of emotional or spiritual doubt into morning sickness (as they did with Salinger's "Franny"). Positive thinking has become synonymous with not thinking at all because it has been usurped by non-thinking public-relations-type hacks and because it has become identified with some future material fulfillment. When affirmative art appears without the trappings of traditional beauties and unrealities, there is no critical apparatus currently available for analyzing it. The intellectual, by and large (myself as well), is so intent on his own cerebrations that he does not feel — that is, experience living as a moment of present time — and he does not admit that tragedy does not abrogate life and love any more than disease and ugly bodies and dusty streets and garrish neon signs do (and these ingredients are all accurately observed and included in *Rabbit, Run*) and that they make life and love more precious and more rewarding in the achievement. The tragedy in *Rabbit, Run* is that Ruth, Eccles and his wife, and Rabbit's wife fail to achieve it. Rabbit does. Even in his apparent defeat he is alive, and he even comes close to identifying himself to himself. "Good lies inside," he finally realizes. "There is nothing outside, those things he was trying to balance have no weight." To underline this theme Updike has used a quotation from Pascal as an epigraph. Its punctuation is important: "The motions of Grace, the hardness of the heart; external circumstances."

The greatest error to make in reading this book is to interpret Rabbit's running as escape, defeat. Such an interpretation fails to include the positive character of his running, especially at the end. It is a tremendously positive action. It is not so because of what it means in terms of something else or in relation to other actions. Its essence is not, as this book is not, in external circumstances. It is the only thing that Rabbit in his alienation from everyone he knows can do. Love, joy, happiness are intense accumulations of energy which demand release in some way. For the creative artist the release can take several (acceptable) forms. For the inarticulate athlete expression is more difficult. Physical response is all that is available to him. An early study of Rabbit appears in Mr. Updike's short story "Ace in the Hole." Here Fred (Ace) Anderson, once a basketball star, now fired from his job at a used-car lot (like Rabbit), runs with his daughter down the block from his mother's house to his own home.

He just runs because he feels like it, he tells his wife, who doesn't understand. Ace and Rabbit are among those in Charles Hamilton Sorley's poem "Song of the Ungirt Runners." "We do not run for prize," they say in the poem. "And we run because we like it / Through the broad bright land." It is with this response that Updike closes the novel: "he runs. Ah: runs. Runs."

Cloquet Bouchardine-Hoffstein

The Works of Akbar Del Piombo

The Hero Maker, by Akbar Del Piombo, with collages by Norman Rubington. Paris: Olympia Press. \$1.00.

Olympia Press, famous publisher of *Lolita* and other celebrated contemporary works, is to be congratulated on publishing this first in a series of books by Del Piombo — philosopher, scholar, *littérateur*, and collagist extraordinary. No serious family should be without one. I can do no better to convince the reader of that fact than to allow, on the pages following, some samples of the brilliance of Del Piombo's text and the subtlety of his art (modestly concealed behind the humorous *nom de plume* "Rubington") to speak eloquently for themselves.

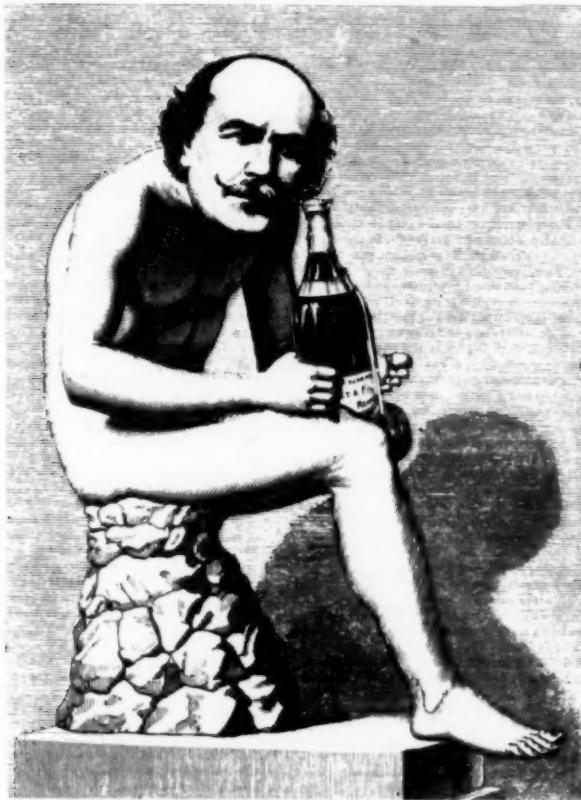


Typical heroic pose (insert shows manner of maintenance).



Heroic Admiration (mutual). "Which
of you by taking thought can add one
cubit to his stature?"...

Alcoholic hero. "Give not that which is holy unto the dogs..."



Short Reviews

Theatre at the Crossroads, by John Gassner. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston. \$5.95.

In *Form and Idea in Modern Theatre* (1954) Professor Gassner gave us a stimulating account of the origins and growth of the varied forms that drama has taken since the advent of realism. Without imposing an artificial and external order on what seemed to be a plethora of unrelated experiments, he pointed the way towards a critical viewpoint that could embrace forms as different as realism and expressionism. In the present book he has come to accept the fact that our theatre is in a state of "permanent crisis," with playwrights

still undecided which of two main roads to follow, realism or anti-realism, prose or poetry, and still unable to discover a form that will encompass both. Neither does he see any likelihood of a solution. "We might as well get used to the possibility that the crisis will vanish only with the modern age, because intrinsic to modern dramatic art is the contradiction of our wanting a theatre that deals with contemporary reality and that, at the same time, has a universal and poetic quality."

Professor Gassner's method is to devote the first part of his book to theoretical considerations and surveys of the work of some major dramatists (his discussion of modern tragedy and his reassessment of O'Neill are especially to be recommended), and the second, longer part to a discussion of the plays that have been seen in New York in the past decade. This kind of organization makes inevitably for some repetition, and it excludes discussion of some important plays that have not reached this country. But this is a small price to pay for what Professor Gassner, alone among contemporary dramatic critics, can give us: a well-informed, well-trained academic approach to theory, coupled with immense and level-headed experience, as viewer and participant, of plays in the theatre.

—John Dennis Hurrell

Time of Apprenticeship: The Fiction of Young James Joyce, by Marvin Magalaner. London, New York, Toronto: Abelard-Schuman. \$3.50.

This is the kind of book that reviewers in the scholarly journals will call, and quite rightly, "useful." It is a study in the continuity and development of Joyce's art, concentrating on the origins and sources of *Dubliners* and *A Portrait* primarily, and on the ways in which they are in turn origins and sources of *Ulysses* and *Finnegan's Wake*. Yet I can't but feel that Mr. Magalaner's spirit is all wrong. His instinct is to see Joyce as a kind of huge compost heap of deliciously various hidden delights for hungry pedants to grub around in. He notes, between dismay and satisfaction, that "in spite of the massive scholarly output relating to Joyce and his works," little has been done with *Stephen Hero*. But every cloud has its silver lining; in fact, one can almost hear Mr. Magalaner salivating: "As the principal gloss on many analogies which later become crucial . . . the early version of *A Portrait* holds riches not yet tapped." *Time of Apprenticeship* is a ponderously careful, unresponsive and wooden book that through sheer meticulousness and concentration turns up some clarifying readings, especially of *Dubliners*. It also has a handy appendix annotating many of *Dubliners'* details of name, place, and language.

—R. F.

